

Finding the Right Words in a Crisis by Carmine Gallo; April 17, 2020

Throughout much of human history, leaders have relied on their words to spark action. Business leaders who want to serve as beacons of clarity and hope for their teams during this uncertain time can apply a few best practices to their speech.

Replace long words with short ones. 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 New Yorkers, he had to make the news instantly clear and understandable. His tweet: “Stay Home. Stop the Spread. Save Lives.” The post spoke volumes — in just 39 characters amounting to seven one-syllable words.

A ‘professional’ 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 mortality.”

Consider the two messages side-by-side. The “professional” version is confusing and convoluted, full of the jargon effective communicators avoid. The Twitter message uses simple words such as “stay,” “home,” and “lives.” Direct, concrete, and easy to understand.

Personalize the crisis. The human brain is also wired for storytelling. Cooperation is essential in a crisis, so effective leaders need to be strong storytellers. Dr. Deborah Birx, the White House’s Coronavirus Response Coordinator, told a heart-wrenching story to underscore the importance of social distancing.

Birx’s grandmother, Leah, was 11 years old during the 1918 flu pandemic, which killed some 50 million people. Leah caught the flu and infected her mother, who 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.”

Birx told the story to reinforce her key message: All Americans play a role in protecting one another. The message appears to be working - expected deaths from Covid-19 have dropped from earlier forecasts because “Americans are... following through on these behavioral changes.”

Observe the rule of three. People respond best to 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 or more, and they’ll forget most of them. 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.

To that end, Fauci often limits himself to three key points. For example, he has repeatedly 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 consistently stresses 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. As a leader at a critical, historic time, choose yours carefully. Use short, direct words and phrases. Tell stories to make it personal. And remember the rule of three.

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