Patrick Lagadec & Emily Hough, How Covid-19 shows the critical need to transform crisis response, *Crisis Response Journal*, blog,

https://www.crisis-response.com/comment/blogpost.php?post=581#Leadership%20%23crisismanagement%20%23Covid19

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Beyond the myriad weaknesses and strengths in dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic, which are sure to be highlighted by experience reviews and inquiries at a later date, this blog shares some essential and immediate convictions. These thoughts are the accumulation of step-by-step observation over four months, built upon the foundations of Patrick Lagadec's four decades of work around – and interventions within – issues arising from major crises. These observations will help to refine the questions that must be asked, and put all the elements of the crisis into perspective.

First of all, we have to go beyond the single specific case of this particular health crisis to discern the crucial issues, both existential and generic, which can send our collective navigation off course in an increasingly chaotic and unknown world.

How to navigate in a crisis when all familiar reference points have disappeared and there is nothing upon which to set anchor? (Image: Nadiia Forkush/123rf)

The heart of these remarks centre around these two points.

- **Diagnosis**: Our visions, devices, methods and preparations are no longer in step with the risks and crises of our time.
- **Action**: We must deeply rethink our theatre of operations, such as our social contracts, and initiate a decisive leap if we want to master our collective navigation along the 'out of context' world in which we now live.

To this end, there are three structural impediments:

1. Outdated visions and preparations

Our visions of risks and crises always lag one war behind and the regularities of the past are no longer relevant benchmarks on which to fix our radar screens. Our previous visions have been configured for isolated, specific and known situations. Today, however, we have to face the hybrid, the systemic and the unknown.

Leaders have been selected, trained and promoted according to their skills in framing and dedicated responses, albeit with some ability to 'support change'. They now face upheaval and permanent questioning against a background of structural unknowns.

Preparations for crisis situations primarily comprise training in how to implement responses to accidents, while emerging crises first and foremost involve the destruction of references. Preparations instil principles, methods and tools in order to avoid surprise – when in truth you should prepare to be surprised first and above all. Such preparations provide patterns of response (on the principle that it is better to provide incorrect answers rather than open questioning), when in fact it is necessary to learn and practise being creative in a situation where cardinal landmarks are imploding.

Leaders, who are often concerned with compliance rather than inventive adaptability, are most often absent from operational preparations (which are not designed for them). Even more deeply, they are culturally reluctant to address any questioning for which they do not already have answers.

In the depths of organisations, inventive personalities are expelled or neutralised, leaving the remaining silos in an increasingly vulnerable situation should an event that does not fall within the framework occur. And such events are now the norm.

2. An outdated grammar of control

Steering is anchored upon knowledge, which sets the course, and compliance that sets the framework. Co-ordination is necessary to connect the various silos, whose members are jealous of their prerogatives, as well as to communicate in order to 'reassure' the base and satisfy the appetite of the media machine. The out-of-the-box issues, which are our historical challenge on all fronts, pulverise these benchmarks and these practices.

The ability to step back becomes the first requirement, yet cultural roots make it the first victim of the crisis.

We should institutionalise the capacities of the Rapid Reflection Force[1], so as not to condemn ourselves to being unable to anticipate, think or deal with current crises.

But this perspective of questioning is contrary to all our anchors and benchmarks in terms of anticipation and management of crisis situations. Facing such questioning is even more terrifying than the prospect of a certain collapse; and this fear causes leaders to retreat instinctively into yesterday's responses and assurances, which benefit from the safe conduct of compliance.

3. An outdated vision of trust

- Our open societies have been transformed by connectivity and an abundance of initiatives. This means that pyramidal logic, which assumes a monopoly on expertise and a natural right to authority, is no longer tenable.
- This leads to a serious break in our vision of the citizen in a crisis situation.[2]

'Normal' collapses [3]

The gaps observed above lead to recurring pathologies, whatever the good will of the actors involved. These include:

- An inability to detect weak signals, let alone aberrant ones, before systems become completely overwhelmed by shocks.
- The impossibility of anticipation while taking action.
- The impossibility of bringing together leadership support for a body such as the Rapid Reflection Force, and therefore negating the capacity to deal with extreme systemic crises.
- An inability to respond creatively to unknown situations.
- The impossibility of conducting a relevant communication policy. And this leads us to implosions of public speech, such as: "We have all the necessary masks," or: "Don't wear masks, it would be dangerous," followed by advice saying that masks, which are often unavailable to the public, are now compulsory.
- Remaining stuck on dogma – the State KNOWS, CAN, and DELIVERS – and it becomes impossible to even consider the idea that there might be a problem, or to concede that there could have been an error. This leads to all processes becoming rigidified, and public anger developing when confronted by untenable rigidities.
- No possibility to adapt.
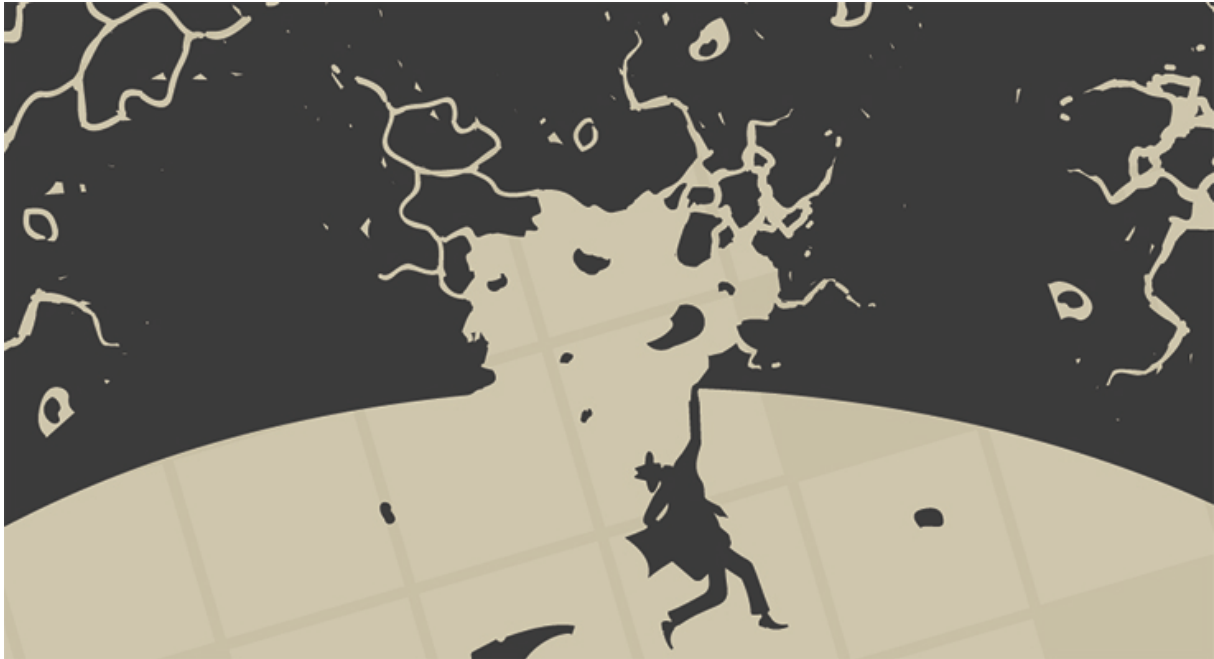
The crises that lie ahead in the future will probably force us through even greater acrobatic sequences (image: Evgeny Bakal/123rf)

All of the above can lead to infinite difficulties, because getting off on the wrong foot at the very beginning of a crisis can rapidly produce multifaceted and lasting pathologies. It can also generate the universal perception that those in charge do not posess the necessary competence to exercise their responsibilities. The result is immense anger and deep dismay, despite the myriad of efforts deployed by officials who have been thrown into the action and whose tasks are being made all the more impossible by responses that have not been worked out beforehand.

Some questions on the piloting during COVID-19

At this stage, we can ask questions of ourselves along the following lines, bearing in mind that everything will be resumed once the work on inquiries and analysis has been completed.

The alert
- On what date was the leadership informed, and by whom, of the fact that the country could be affected by events in China, and of which there was limited and biased knowledge?
- What was the nature of the alert in question, and to whom was it addressed?
- What was the leadership's reaction to this alert, if it existed, and when did it occur?
- Who sounded the alert, when and how, that the WHO posture risked serious consequences in terms of preparation? To use an aviation safety analogy, the formal declaration of pandemic would be the equivalent to a ground proximity warning only being triggered after the manufacturer of the device has given its permission for the declaration, leaving no time to avoid a crash.

The means
- On what date was the leadership executive informed, by whom, in what form, of deficiencies in masks and other critical materials?

- How did state officials respond to the alerts issued by business and the private sector on the need to anticipate?

Expertise

- How were scientific committees constituted, and with what mission?
- What preparations did those committees undertake in order to carry out their task of lighting the way in such an extreme, unknown situation far beyond the purely viral dimension of the crisis?
- What about navigation in complexity? Health and economic risks have often been viewed separate, opposite threats, as if economic collapse, mental trauma and social disintegration have absolutely no health effects.
- How does one prepare to navigate in a context of expertise which is also grappling with the unknown and crossed by currents as diverse as they are contrary? It is difficult to do so when confronted by extravagances outside of the rational system, ensured by imposing media coverage and 'a fulminant explosion on social networks at the time of the triumph of the so-called' alternative truths'.

Communication

- Who decided to pronounce that masks are useless, and even dangerous? Or, in other countries, that social distancing was useless? And on what reasoning was those statements made? There is a large range of failures here, from the cultural impossibility when it comes to sharing doubts and concerns, to the new mode of leaders embracing 'alternative reality'.

Acrobatic style catch-ups and navigating crest lines

- How to catch up with control and communication of a situation after a start marked by very great difficulties?
- What lessons can be learned from the experience of leaders who had to make critical adjustments to escape the deep ruts that had been created? These are certainly interesting important points to investigate, because the crises that lie ahead in the future will probably force us through even greater acrobatic sequences, far from cruise control.
- How to lead, over a long period, along a path exposed to the risk of a brutal and total change of scenery, major contradictions on decision points, and that are marked by ratcheting effects? We have a lot to learn in the management of wicked situations[4], and in an 'unthinkable' environment[5] marked by explosive fragmentation.

The urgency of transformations

New deal: We should fundamentally review our approaches to risk and crisis management to put us in tune with the threats and crises of our time. This starts with the realisation that we are generally fighting the last war, and that a strategic leap is now of existential importance.

Managers: Should be prepared to operate outside the framework. They can be helped in this task by setting up, at least in a few strategic areas, Rapid Reflection Forces to prepare, train, and connect with executive circles in an intelligent, inventive and operational way.

Organisations: Should favour all cross-cutting projects that are marked by hybrid inventiveness, which penalises ongoing battles between competing silos. Organisations should protect and enhance (and therefore stop ejecting) individuals who show inventiveness and the ability to think and deal with the outside world. This will prevent paralysis from taking hold, giving free rein to sheer nonsense.

Experts: Must be prepared for the unknown and to intervene in an extreme situation; they have to avoid knee-jerk assurances, as well as ramblings that can rapidly coagulate

all of the regressions engendered by the fear of chaos. We must prepare leaders to operate with expertise in great difficulty.

Citizens: Should be prepared to find their bearings in the great turbulence, and to take their full share in bottom-up driven dynamics. In turn, those at the 'top' will have to learn how to recognise, value and encourage such initiatives and dynamics. The public must be prepared not to rely solely on officials, but to accept individual responsibility for collective demands.

If these leaps are not tolerated, the next attacks will be fatal.

The challenge today is to know if we will actually reach a posture, despite our previous habits – that allows us to learn the lessons from these events.

The mega-shocks that follow will be just as destabilising, probably even more so, if we do not resolutely undertake the changes necessary to put us in tune with today's risks and crises.

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