

Crisis Leadership ... Leadership Lessons from SARS

Undoubtedly, SARS is the most prominent news today. It is one of the gravest crises that the Singapore government has to face in the history of the nation. The war against SARS has shown the leadership mettle of our leaders.

What must leaders do in a time of crisis?

1. Building Trust

Like Rome, trust is never built in a day. Trust between our leaders and their people have been built over time. It has been cultivated over time.

Trust has to do with honesty, competence and compassion. One of the most poignant lessons of the SARS crisis is the importance of coming out clean about the facts. Cover-up and deceit by leaders can be devastating as we have already seen happened in China when the outbreak occurred there late last year. In such a situation, trust has been eroded and it is hard to mend it again when the people cannot trust their leaders and government..

The point is not just about being honest but it's about what we as leaders do with the facts. In a crisis, what kind of actions would we as leaders have taken to show that we are not afraid of truth telling (including dispelling rumors and falsehoods). How do we demonstrate leadership competence to confront issues head-on?

Your credibility as a leader is given to you by your followers. It is people who decide if a leader is credible. It is your people who give you the right to be their leader.

2. Galvanizing the whole team

In commenting on Singapore's effort to fight SARS, Paul Jacob, correspondent for The Straits Times, is right as he writes, "I know of no place in the world where the resources of every ministry I can think of have been brought together to deal with this viral menace."ⁱ

Every member of the Singapore Cabinet speaks from a common platform, sings the same tune (some of them did it literally to raise funds for SARS!), and mobilizes his or her own team to combat this battle over fear of SARS. Most of all, the entire Government stands united to galvanize the whole nation to rise up to this challenge of defeating the disease.

Even opposition Parliament members have been won over to focus on our common enemy. Singaporeans, at least the majority of us, are convinced that our Government has done very well and are united together to bring this crisis under control.

Are we using a sledgehammer to kill a fly? Some may ask. Perhaps. But SARS is no small fly. I would rather be safe than sorry.

3. Leading by example

One of the most powerful images for me was to see on TV how our Prime Minister and Senior Minister were taking their temperatures as they entered into the Parliament for the debate on SARS. They were walking their talk.

SARS-suspected Members of Parliament, like MP Mr Tan Cheng Bok, kept away. It was revealed that during a cabinet meeting, the Minister of Education had to speak via video-conferencing because he had high fever.

The Straits Times also reported that “Ten Cabinet and junior ministers, led by the Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, sat on stage at Kallang Theatre, a demonstration of the Government’s all-out effort to combat the virus at all fronts,”ⁱⁱ.

Among other things, the Ministers and Members of Parliament went around schools, hawker centers, community events, attended corporate functions, and visited restaurants to show that the SARS fear has to be broken. Life needs to be brought back to normality. Our leaders have shown the way.

Leaders not only must lead but must also be seen to lead. Walking among your people is not just for show.

Kouzes and Posner in *The Leadership Challenge* write: “The First Law of Leadership: If we don’t believe *in* the messenger, we won’t believe the message.”ⁱⁱⁱ

4. Combining firmness with compassion

For me, this is perhaps, the most outstanding quality shown by our leaders in a time of crisis. During the Parliament debate, there was great exchange of ideas but we also saw for the first time that our leaders were also people of emotions. The Members of Parliament fought back tears in delivering their speeches. This is the human side of leadership which we have not seen for a long time!

On the one hand, we have introduced draconian measures, like quarantining all workers and sellers and their families from the Pasir Panjang Vegetable Wholesale Market, electronic tracking those under quarantine and even fining/jailing those who violate their quarantine orders and then most recently, barring visits to hospital.

On the other hand, the Government is handing out thermometers to all school children, subsidizing those who are quarantined, and contributing financially to SARS victims and health care workers.

Leadership is about making tough decisions. Our government has certainly not shrunk from making them but most unexpectedly, with a big dose of compassion. Kudos to them!

Could they have done more? Of course! But they have already done enough to demonstrate to us that they are both firm and compassionate in tackling this crisis.

5. **Identifying and communicating clearly the issues**

One of the roles of leadership is to define reality.

As risk communication consultants Jody Lanard and Peter Sandman, pointed out in their article in the Strait Times, May 6, 2003, Singapore is doing right in communicating about SARS by:

Acknowledging uncertainty rather than claiming to be confident;
Using anticipatory guidance and emotional rehearsal to help people get used to what may happen;
Treating reactions with respect rather than contempt;
Sharing dilemmas so people come to understand the pros and cons of difficult pending decisions; and
Offering suggestions for things people can do themselves.”^{iv}

I cannot agree more. Here are some other communication lessons.

Communicating Concisely

As Deputy Prime Minister BG Lee Hsien Loong communicates so clearly, “The Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) is a grave threat to Singapore.”^v He then went on to outline cogently and precisely the three battle fronts: public health, the economy and the society and the three lines of defence around three groups of people: those who are already infected or who might be infected, those who are not infected and those entering Singapore who might bring in the virus.^{vi}

Mobilizing into Action

The communication strategy has been most effectively executed. One of the key components of success in communication is getting the message across to the rank and file, the *hoi polloi*. Our leaders have done this well too. Community organizations, schools, religious institutions, restaurants, corporations have all been roped in to bring home the message. This is, perhaps, one of the most successful campaigns in not only creating awareness but also in getting the people to act on what they have been informed in terms of responsible social and civic behavior.

Line of sight Communication

It’s not just getting the big picture across but what each constituent, every individual can do to make it happen.

We see the results in school notices, SARS leaflets at void decks, WHO health declaration forms at airport, company advisory through emails, and large newspaper adverts and constant bombardment over the media.

Severely affected industries are fighting back: heavily discounted price on airline travels by SIA, taxi-drivers compliantly taking temperatures at health centers, mass clean-ups at hawker centers, dropping name cards at restaurants and most of all, people becoming more hygienic and socially responsible.

6. Preparing troops for on going battle

SARS is here to stay.

The battle is not won yet. Social behaviors are still hard to change. The economy is sputtering and the worst is yet to come. Selfishness is our human nature.

Prime Minister Mr. Goh Chok Tong and his team have been quick to acknowledge this. Much more can be and have to be done.

Mr. Goh recognizes that all it takes for SARS to break out again is one socially irresponsible behavior. He has said that “while Singapore is getting on top of the SARS problem, it cannot control it fully, as just one SARS case could give rise to another cluster of infections.”^{vii}

Even if Singapore is SARS-free, our economy is closely linked to the region and the world. In a globalized world, one economy affects the other. Unless China and Hong Kong have a tighter grip of the SARS situation and become SARS free, economic recovery will be most difficult as China is now the new engine of growth. As someone jokingly commented, “If SARS is not contained, we will certainly suffer from AIDS (Acute Income Deficit Syndrome)!”

You can be sure that much more will be done in the all-out effort against SARS. Great leaders are willing to acknowledge their limitations and recognize there is always room for improvement.

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ⁱ Jacob, P. *Draconian? Singapore is just doing what it needs to fight SARS*. The Straits Times. H11. May 3, 2003.

ⁱⁱ Henson, B. *Do your part, stop selfish behavior*. The Straits Times, May 3, 2003.

ⁱⁱⁱ Kouze, J.M. & Posner, B.Z. *The Leadership Challenge*. Jossey-Bass Publishers. San Francisco, CA.

^{iv} Lanard, J. & Sandman, P.M. *Sars communication: What Singapore is Doing Right*. The Straits Times, May 6, 2003.

^v Hsien Loong, L. *Battling a national crisis*. Reported by The Straits Times, April 25, 2003.

^{vi} Hsien Loong, L. *Battling a national crisis*. Reported by The Straits Times, April 25, 2003.

^{vii} Henson, B. *Do your part, stop selfish behavior*. The Straits Times, May 3, 2003.