

Being a Public Manager in Times of Crisis: The Art of Managing Stakeholders, Political Masters, and Collaborative Networks

COVID-19 Viewpoint

Abstract: *The COVID-19 pandemic is seen as the biggest crisis since World War II. What started out as a public health issue has quickly morphed into a political, economic, and societal crisis of epic proportions. Administrative capacity is a major factor in determining whether societies will emerge from this unprecedented situation with resilience and optimism or despair and disconnectedness, and whether trust in government will increase or decrease. Autonomous and competent public managers are key producers of such administrative capacity. This essay addresses those public managers, the unsung administrative heroes leading us through times of crisis from behind the scenes. Translating the state of the art in public administration literature, with a particular emphasis on publications in this journal, into accessible practitioner recommendations, it identifies three key competencies paramount to public managers in times of crisis: managing stakeholders, political masters, and collaborative networks.*

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The COVID-19 pandemic is seen as the biggest crisis since World War II. What started out as a public health issue has quickly morphed into a political, economic, and societal crisis of epic proportions. Governments across the globe are struggling to come to terms with how they can most effectively respond to ongoing events while being overwhelmed by competing expert assessments, key public value trade-offs, and capacity constraints.

Administrative capacity is a major factor in determining whether societies will emerge from this unprecedented situation with resilience and optimism or despair and disconnectedness, and whether trust in government will increase or decrease. However, media attention almost exclusively concerns political leaders operating in the spotlight: the front stage of government. The back stage of government hardly receives attention. Moreover, common discourse often undervalues the importance of well-functioning bureaucracies or even takes the form of “bureaucrat bashing” (Garrett et al. 2006; Goodsell 2018).

As a result, we hear little about the public managers who helm the public agencies and service delivery chains that are critical to the success or failure of politically forged crisis strategies, which they have to frantically translate into law and policy and implement to the best of their abilities. They do so behind the scenes, in accordance with a long-established tradition of separating politics from administration (Nalbandian 1994; Svava 2001; Wilson 1887).

It is still early days, and making claims about which countries have employed the best mitigation strategy so far is tricky. However, countries that consistently occupy the top rungs of global governance rankings, such as Singapore, New Zealand, Australia, Taiwan, and Denmark (Rothstein 2011; Van der Wal 2017a, 2019), seem to have addressed the COVID-19 crisis relatively swiftly, effectively, and competently, at least in terms of fatalities and infection rates. Clearly, quality of government matters, perhaps more than ever before. Autonomous and competent public managers are the primary actors contributing to quality of government (Fukuyama 2013). This certainly also holds for health care emergency situations, as studies have shown (Henderson 2013).

This essay addresses those public managers, the unsung administrative heroes leading us through times of crisis from behind the scenes. Translating the state of the art in public administration literature, with a particular emphasis on publications in this journal, into accessible practitioner recommendations, it identifies three key competencies paramount to public managers in times of crisis. First, this essay outlines the characteristics of the current operating environment for public managers. Then, it discusses why stakeholder engagement and communication, political astuteness, and collaborative capacity are essential for sailing the ship of government through times of crisis. Lastly, it provides a set of action points for public managers seeking to further perfection and apply these competencies.

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A VUCA Operating Environment

The operating environment created by the COVID-19 pandemic bears all the characteristics of a VUCA world (Bennett and Lemoine 2014; Johansen 2007), characterized by *volatility*, *uncertainty*, *complexity*, and *ambiguity*. Indeed, the VUCA concept first emerged in military circles in the post–Cold War environment of the early 1990s (Hartley 2018), precisely to stimulate thinking about planning and preparing for operating environments increasingly characterized by so-called wild cards and black swans. These are unlikely, high-impact events that are complex, expensive, and seldom politically expedient to anticipate and plan for (Ho 2008, 2010; Petersen 2000). The COVID-19 pandemic clearly is such an event, if there ever was one. It presents governments with a super wicked problem (Levin et al. 2012).

The VUCA concept stipulates that managers have to deal with a range of “known unknowns” and “unknown unknowns,” not only in terms of projected outcomes but also in terms of the required skills, strategies, and parameters. Issues surrounded by *volatility* and *uncertainty* are more “known” but challenging in their own right. They require a certain degree of flexibility and adaptiveness as well as foresight and strategic planning capabilities. Situations characterized by *complexity* and *ambiguity* are least “known,” requiring experimentation and piloting as well as the engagement of unconventional expertise.

Clearly, a VUCA operating environment creates challenges for public managers tasked with crafting responses to events for which no clear solutions exist. At the same time, however, such environments also provide exciting opportunities for innovation in public service delivery and governance arrangements, in collaboration with citizens and vanguards of change from other sectors. The cliché “never waste a good crisis” is often heard these days.

To turn new challenges into opportunities, public managers need to master and display a variety of competencies. The remainder of this essay discusses three essential competencies drawn from research evidence, illustrated with practical examples in the context of the current crisis.

Three Key Competencies for Public Managers in Times of Crisis

Stakeholder Engagement and Storytelling

Explaining and selling unprecedented and unpopular measures to a wide variety of increasingly anxious and impatient stakeholders is a herculean task. Clearly, public managers need to sensibly assess how stakeholders may respond to plans and programs and how they can move stakeholders in the desired direction and acquire *exchange legitimacy* and *influence legitimacy* (Suchman 1995). Classification and prioritization are key here, as they largely determine engagement and participation strategies (Bryson 2004; Fung 2015; Nabatchi 2012).

After mapping stakeholder dynamics and interrelationships, public managers need to come up with strategies to manage their stakeholder allegiances, in order to enlarge their support base while minimizing the number of adversaries as well as the adversaries’ powers to derail strategies and decisions. Strategic stakeholder

management ultimately aims to grow allegiances by convincing indifferent stakeholders to become followers or even advocates.

In the current COVID-19 context, we can observe just how challenging this proves to be. For instance, in the polarized political environment of the United States, where individual cities and states communicate, implement, and phase measures differently, small groups of ideological adversaries of differentiated lockdown measures may be largely irresponsive to evidence-based counter frames. At the same time, widely respected epidemiologists and virologists who are among the few senior bureaucrats operating at center stage should now seek to maximize their credibility in acting as advocates of sensible lockdown measures, largely based on the latest medical know-how, to enhance the follower category, nudging indifferent stakeholders to move over to the follower category.

Table 1 provides a basic stakeholder allegiance worksheet that shows how managers can manage and engage stakeholders at various levels of allegiance in times of crisis (Van der Wal 2017b, 71). Interestingly, much of the “traffic” is likely to take place toward the indifferent category, the average citizen or silent majority, where public managers may have to compete with other actors seeking to co-opt these stakeholders into their sphere of influence and support.

An illustrative example is how the administrative leadership of the Singapore Tourism Board suddenly had to deal with a complete halt of foreigners traveling into the highly globalized city-state, whose success narrative has been built on being an entrepôt and “perennial stop-over city” with people traveling in and out 24/7. The board’s CEO explained,¹

The SARS crisis has taught us the importance of frequent and transparent communications with both our industry partners and visitors from the onset of the crisis. Since the start of the COVID-19 outbreak, we have regularly shared the latest health and travel advisories, kept up our engagement with them to explain our policy decisions and reassured them that Singapore remains committed to our long-term partnership. Apart from stepping up our communications efforts overseas, we know it is critical to support the industry in a timely manner during times of need. Another significant difference from SARS is the prevalence of digital and social media, which are key channels for us to communicate with Singaporeans and the international community. We have to

Table 1 Stakeholder Allegiance Worksheet

Level of Allegiance	How to Manage
Advocates	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Keep on side through active engagement• Use their input directly and visibly in policies and proposals
Followers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Increase their understanding of benefits• Avoid temptation to exploit or take support for granted
Indifferent	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Identify and address knowledge gaps• Keep informed and updated across platforms
Blockers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Court and convince of mutual interests and agendas• Actively explain and frame to overcome fears
Adversaries	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Counter frames and arguments• Develop deep understanding of their values and interests

manage these channels in real-time, as that is the expectation from our audiences today.

Indeed, to maximize allegiances in the current operating environment, public managers have to develop antennae for stakeholder dynamics and become active storytellers who communicate real life on all the platforms they have at their disposal. These new competencies will have to complement, and in some cases replace, more traditional ones such as bargaining and negotiating (Rhodes 2016), as governments can no longer assume they are starting from a position of superior authority, power, and information. Moreover, communication between public managers and stakeholders consists of bidirectional exchanges (Mergel 2010, 2012), with public managers having to monitor, respond, and adapt, rather than simply broadcast their points of view (Garnett and Kouzmin 2007). In other words, they have to skillfully frame their messaging.

In political science and the communication sciences, the topic of framing has received ample scholarly attention (Chong and Druckman 2007; Jacoby 2000), dating back to McLuhan's (1967) seminal work *The Medium Is the Message*. More recently, public administration scholars have started to show interest in framing (de Bruijn 2011). Even though most of their examples concern politicians, particularly in times of crisis, public managers increasingly have to "go out there" themselves to persuade other public, private, and civic actors to support their policies, programs, and proposals.

An additional crucial communicative tool is the ability to successfully *brand* policies and programs (Eshuis and Klijn 2012, 11–12). Brands bind because they create loyalty among actors and networks (Eshuis and Klijn 2012). Indeed, right after it became clear that the protracted crisis environment required severe measures and thus long-term stakeholder buy-in, governments began to frequently and consistently communicate uniting and, at the same time, sometimes country-unique slogans and labels, such as "Intelligent Lockdown" and "Beating Corona Together" (Netherlands), "Let's All Do Our Part" (Singapore), and "Stay at Home, Save Lives, and Protect the NHS" (United Kingdom). Such deliberate policy branding aims to evoke a sense of belonging, positive association, and collective identity across stakeholders with sometimes competing interests.

Managing Political Masters with Political Astuteness

Public managers in times of crisis have to be *politically astute* to critically advise their political masters—that is, speak truth to power without risking getting sidelined. This competency, defined by Hartley et al. (2013, 24) as "deploying political skills in situations involving diverse and sometimes competing interests and stakeholders, in order to achieve sufficient alignment of interests and/or consent in order to achieve outcomes," is relevant to managerial work across sectors, particularly for those in more senior positions.

Being neutral about political outcomes, political astuteness pertains to "small p" as well as "big P" politics—the informal as well as the formal, according to Hartley et al. (2015, 197). Although the use of "political" extends to political interactions across a wide range of issues, arenas, and stakeholders, reading and accommodating the

styles, agendas, and stakeholder allegiances of administrative and political bosses is particularly crucial. We see these dynamics playing out on our television screens every day.

Moreover, an ever-important responsibility of public managers in times of crisis is to keep their head cool, to maintain the long view, and to ensure a degree of institutional continuity and policy consistency. It is far from easy to successfully enact this response to the current turbulence bestowed upon us by the pandemic, not in the least given how political leaders respond to and often add to this turbulence. Indeed, the crisis places increased responsibility upon public managers to maintain a sense of continuity and neutrality in managing institutions and policies, both in terms of situational "emergency management" as well as institutional "crisis leadership" (t Hart 2014, 137). In other words, being politically astute does not mean that one can neglect to safeguard important institutional qualities and values in times of turbulence.

At the same time, crises provide opportunities for maximizing bureaucratic power and influence (Frederickson and Matkin 2007; Partridge 1974) by consistently pushing sound policy proposals and maintaining order, continuity, and collegiality in turbulent times. Indeed, public managers have always derived much of their legitimacy and authority from domain knowledge and experience, and studies show that expertise is among the values considered most important by public managers in various countries (Van der Wal 2008; Yang and Van der Wal 2014). Politicians, often lacking such expertise, depend on public managers for authoritative advice and support (Aberbach, Putnam, and Rockman 1981), and political executives eagerly outsource the organization of sufficient expertise to their administrative apparatus.

However, the perceived importance of domain expertise for public managers has ebbed as a consequence of increasing job rotation and emphasis on managerial skills within senior executive services across the globe, and increased political populism and polarization (t Hart and Wille 2006; Van der Wal 2017b). This, in turn, may have weakened their positions of authority vis-à-vis political bosses.

Particularly in times of crisis, clusters and "camps" of public managers and their constituents will always compete for attention and authority. In the Netherlands, for instance, the prime minister characterized the recommendations of the Outbreak Management Team, populated by highly credentialed leaders from the medical space, as "sacred" during the first two months of the crisis. Particularly when it became clear that the crisis would be protracted and morph into stages of economic recovery and long-term social adjustment (Boin et al. 2016), academic experts, other parts of the bureaucracy, and opposition parties argued for an Impact Management Team to provide a more diverse inflow of advice. So far, no such team has been formally established, but the government has broadened the circle of experts it consults.²

In addition, the abundance of publicly available data, made accessible by information brokers with more or less altruistic intentions, completes the picture of today's competitive public sector information landscape. As a result, competing streams of information and policy advice find their way up to the highest echelons (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2017).

Table 2 lists three key challenges for public managers striving to remain authoritative experts and suggests actions and approaches for mitigating these challenges. Clearly, both expertise and managerial skills are important, but the importance of being viewed as politically astute should not be underestimated if public managers want to remain relevant, legitimate, and authoritative when managing up, certainly in a crisis context in which evidence and expertise are constantly disputed.

Empowering and Leveraging Collaborative Networks

A crisis forces public managers to collaborate more closely within different, sometimes ad hoc networks consisting of state and nonstate actors—citizens, nongovernmental organizations, businesses, charities, and social enterprises. For more than two decades, scholars have argued that collaborative public management is not just a necessity but an inevitability (Agranoff 2006; Bryson, Crosby, and Stone 2015; Emerson, Nabatchi, and Balogh 2012; McGuire 2006). This is not to say, however, that public managers and their political masters wholeheartedly embrace this notion. In fact, the urge to simplify, reduce, monopolize, and bureaucratize super wicked problems like the COVID-19 pandemic is still omnipresent.

Effective collaboration requires managers to bring together widely divergent agendas, norms, working styles, worldviews, and opportunistic motives of partners. Just think of the initial battles between and within governments over the purchase of medical equipment, the support of specific industries, and attempts to acquire vaccines: while individual governments would have benefited from more collaboration, they behaved in the exact opposite way in the context of “every country for itself.” Various producers of medical equipment utilized the environment of scarcity to increase prices substantially.

Moreover, various entrepreneurial initiatives emerged, with individuals and ad hoc business ventures without any experience in producing medical equipment assertively offering their services to many European countries, some well intended but others much less so.³ In many cases, public managers became reluctant to engage with citizen initiatives as well as unknown producers in other countries for fear that amateur contributions would degrade service quality, an observation that is congruent with earlier research (Alford and O’Flynn 2012, 132–133).

Table 2 Public Managers as Authoritative Experts: Challenges and Strategies

Challenges	Strategies
<i>Open data</i> Data from a wide variety of sources are publicly available and easily accessible.	Filter, translate, and broker public data presented to political and administrative masters.
<i>Competitive advice</i> Consultants, international agencies, interest groups, lobbyists, and colleagues eagerly offer expertise to political and administrative bosses.	Collaborate with but set conditions and norms for external advisers to masters and penalize noncompliance.
<i>“Politics of expertise”</i> Political and administrative bosses and professional groups contest expertise and evidence, certainly in times of crisis	Organize channels and allegiances of expertise, rather than losing energy over continuous battles with actors who may be hard to convince anyway.

As the crisis moves into a different phase, we are witnessing increasing collaboration between and within bureaucracies with regard to the major policy challenges that now present themselves—such as the nature of collectively funded stimulus packages⁴ and the funding of transboundary research into medical and nonmedical aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic⁵—and between public and private actors in developing and providing access to vaccines.⁶

One important issue that is sometimes overlooked in the vast literature on collaborative management is worth mentioning in the current context: public managers struggle, first and foremost, with getting collaboration going within their own government, certainly when the “we’re in this together” sentiment present during the initial crisis phase wanes. As public managers assume that the interests and agendas of nongovernmental partners differ from theirs, their expectations for these partners may be lower but also more easily exceeded.

Despite years of talking about “whole of government” and “joined-up government” (see Christensen and Læg Reid 2007), this is still not the norm, even more so for collaboration in supranational, multilevel, and cross-national settings such as the United Nations, the World Health Organization, or the European Union, displayed all too painfully in this present time. Therefore, many of the challenges and competencies discussed here apply just as much to realizing intragovernmental and intergovernmental collaboration—a key precondition for successful multisectoral partnerships (see also Howes et al. 2014).

Moving Forward: Action Points

This essay concludes with four action points for public managers in times of crisis:

1. Invest in communicative capacity and social media skills to complement more traditional administrative crafts, through recruitment as well as development of existing cohorts.
2. Make an effort to engage stakeholders (supportive and adversarial), as winning them over will produce significant long-term gains in terms of legitimacy and support.
3. Maintain a nodal position in competing streams of advice targeting political masters, as providing credible and usable information in a timely manner allows for a more critical stance when needed.
4. Strive to balance control and flexibility in collaborating with other actors and sectors while realizing not all risks can be mitigated in seeking added value from (ad hoc) partners.

Notes

- 1 “Supporting Stakeholders through COVID-19 and Planning for Recovery in Singapore,” City Nation Place, April 8, 2020, <https://www.citynationplace.com/stakeholders-citizens-covid-19-crisis-singapore> (accessed July 6, 2020).
- 2 See <https://www.trouw.nl/politiek/rutte-gaat-meer-experts-raadplegen-en-meer-zelf-de-politieke-regie-nemen-b47ede1f/?referer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F> (accessed July 6, 2020).
- 3 See “Hunt for Medical Supplies Creates Marketplace of Desperation,” *U.S. News & World Report*, April 4, 2020, <https://www.usnews.com/news/us/articles/2020-04-04/hunt-for-medical-supplies-creates-marketplace-of-desperation>; Liza Lin and Eva Xiao, “China’s Medical-Goods Market Is ‘Wild West’ amid Surging Coronavirus Demand,” *Wall Street Journal*, April 23, 2020,

- <https://www.wsj.com/articles/chinas-medical-goods-market-is-wild-west-amid-surge-coronavirus-demand-11587654973>; Fab Lab Baltimore, <http://www.fablabaltimore.org/> (amateurs making masks and face shields); Peter Allen Clark, “‘This Is Truly a Last Resort.’ Makers Are 3D Printing Ventilator Parts and Sewing Masks amid a Critical Shortage in Medical Supplies,” *Time*, April 1, 2020, <https://time.com/5811091/makers-3d-printing-coronavirus/>; and Sarah Sexton, “It Takes a Village to Make Face Masks for the Region,” *Route Bay City*, April 16, 2020, <https://www.secondwavemedia.com/baycity/features/4m-mask-makers.aspx> (all accessed July 6, 2020).
- 4 BBC News, “Coronavirus: France and Germany Propose €500 bn Recovery Fund,” May 18, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-52712370> (accessed July 6, 2020).
 - 5 Jeffrey Mervis, “Massive U.S. Coronavirus Stimulus Includes Research Dollars and Some Aid to Universities,” *Science*, March 25, 2020, <https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2020/03/massive-us-coronavirus-stimulus-includes-research-dollars-and-some-aid-universities>; and European Parliament, “EU Action: Research on Covid-19 Vaccines and Cures,” updated June 6, 2020, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/headlines/society/20200323STO75619/eu-action-research-on-covid-19-vaccines-and-cures> (both accessed July 6, 2020).
 - 6 European Commission, “Coronavirus Global Response: 7.4 Billion Raised for Universal Access to Vaccines,” May 4, 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_797 (accessed July 6, 2020).

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