

Managing The Next Crisis: Twelve Principles For Dealing With Viral Uncertainty

By Katherine Barrett, Richard Greene, and Donald F. Kettl



On January 21, 2020, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) confirmed the first case of a mysterious disease with origins in Asia: it would come to be known as COVID-19. Within ten days, the World Health Organization (WHO) issued a global health emergency, followed shortly by restrictions on air travel. By February 3, the United States declared a public health emergency. In the ensuing months, more than 700,000 Americans died, while over five million people have suffered fatalities worldwide at the time of this report publication. In mid-summer 2021, the Delta variant of the disease emerged as far more contagious than its predecessors, even as experts hoped that the pandemic's remaining days could be counted.

Governments and societies continue to face the unforeseen and unprecedented challenges of responding to and recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic. This experience has pointed to the importance of well-managed actions at the local, national, and cross-border levels. Many of

these steps address issues that are now well documented, including medical support for testing, contact tracing, and vaccine management; supply chain challenges around vaccine production and distribution; impacts on local job markets; and the importance of addressing equity in delivering needed social services.

When Uncertainty Mixes with Opportunity

One essential step to turning the pandemic crisis into something teachers call a “learning moment” involves identifying how governments at all levels might have better navigated the nation through a calamity the likes of which few living Americans can recall. America’s unique form of government posed important challenges in combatting the virus—but it also frames important lessons for responding to future pandemics, as well as to a broad array of other and often unpredictable crises.

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As the nation transitions from the heights of the pandemic, an opportunity presents itself to go beyond that first step and reach the next crucial level: actionable steps that federal, state, and local governments can take in responding and recovering to future, if likely less widespread, traumas.

This report, assembled over the course of many months, addresses that goal of helping governments capture lessons learned for future action, relying not just on lessons from the pandemic but also from other tragic events of the near or intermediate past. Reflecting on this task, the report coins a new term for this moment when uncertainty mixes with opportunity: the “Pandoric,” based on the ancient Greek poet Hesiod’s mythic tale of the first woman on earth, Pandora. In this story, each of the gods presented Pandora with gifts of grace or beauty. One mysterious present, though, came as a dowry in the form of a large jar often used to contain oil. The jar was sealed carefully, but when her husband Epimetheus asked about its contents they opened it together. Out flew the pantheon of diseases, troubles, and worries that would forever afflict mankind. Once they had escaped, though, the box was not empty. Hope remained.

Lessons learned over that period can and should apply to the current crisis, and those that will inevitably befall governments at all levels in months and years to come. Twelve principles follow for confronting and softening the impact of the next trial. These principles are based on conversations with experts, insights gained from academic and popular study of the pandemic and other similarly unpredictable yet devastating events, and reliance on a combined 120 years of experience the authors have accumulated in researching analyzing and writing about government.

Discussion of the twelve principles form the large portion of this report. The first four principles address how governments can build partnerships, the next four how governments can manage networks, and the last four how governments can steer outcomes.

Four Principles for Building Partnerships



1. All crises are local—but there is wide variation in how localities respond.

COVID showed that big crises inevitably start as local problems, and then percolate across borders in a way that proves a poor match for solving the larger crisis. Local governments—cities, counties, and states—must lead the response, but the federal government has a primary responsibility to devise strategy and coordinate across the country, because one community’s problems can quickly become every community’s crisis.



2. Centralized policy does not matter—if it does not get local support. COVID teaches that great expectations in Washington can evaporate without active partnerships to bring those expectations to life. Some partnerships must involve nongovernmental entities, like private companies and nonprofits, while others must involve state and local governments. The federal government's foremost responsibility in crises is not only to design policies, but also to design the partnerships required to bring those policies to life. The federal government can help lead the charge against a widespread crisis, but its primary responsibility often involves obtaining buy-in from and coordinating the efforts of states, counties, and cities.



3. Governments need a language to talk about crises—and the language is data. Data is key to understanding a problem well enough to develop a solution. But the various players responding to a crisis must be able to communicate with one another using consistent terms, definitions, and methodology for the data. COVID showed that data matter more than many government officials realized, and that data can help create a language for defining a crisis, laying out a plan for solving it and tracking success. The federal government must lead, with federal experts defining a common language to ensure coordinated communication about issues that matter—in a way that helps drive and track effective state and local action.



4. Emergencies are fought with goods, services, and logistics—but state and local governments cannot preserve supply chains alone. Solutions to many major crises, from wildfires to hurricanes to the pandemic, require assets like hoses, sandbags, masks, and vaccines. Large-scale crises often require large-scale mobilization of supplies and equipment; mobilization on a large, coordinated scale typically falls beyond the reach of even the largest of the nation's subgovernments. To achieve a rapid, effective response, the nation needs to rely on the federal government for creating and leveraging needed national supply chains. Central coordination for their procurement prevents the various players involved from competing against one another, which can lead to higher prices and unnecessary shortages.



5. Governments must grow needed expertise—and wake from any delusions of confidence. Steering through complex crises—and the complex systems we need to tackle them—relies on people. The pandemic demonstrated an increasing shortage of the necessary personnel to deal with a health care crisis. The nation must develop better means for growing the next generation of experts in multiple fields who can serve in times of need. Listening to competing scientific views is not ever easy, but the more complex the crisis, the greater the need for insights from those trained to wrestle with them. The nation not only needs to find a place in public debate for experts, but also to build the people pipeline today to ensure a sufficient supply of experts now for the future.



6. Artificial intelligence and predictive analytics can help—there is no need to fly blind. Technology is a central element to solving most modern problems, though not the only element. Artificial intelligence can help governments to better understand problems and form solutions. The use of predictive analytics like artificial intelligence and machine learning could fuel far more useful strategies by experts.



7. Managing risks helps to avoid crises from getting unnecessarily worse. Unlikely events that have high potential consequences still require preparation. Risk management can help weigh the odds and spell out plans for future calamities. Risk management needs to be part of the basic game plan of every political leader. This does not mean that the leader needs to personally participate in and resolve every potential problem. But it does mean that the leader needs to be schooled in black swan events that might occur, to exercise responses for the events likely to demand attention, and to ensure that the team builds the capacity to act on even low probability events that could ultimately prove damaging. Risks must also be communicated throughout the organization and with the public so that they can be anticipated and addressed appropriately.



8. The key is networks—but they do not spontaneously organize themselves. When addressing a major crisis, organizing all the participants trying to respond is necessary. Unfortunately, these kinds of networks must be consciously formed—they do not come together spontaneously. Networks provide the core of the nation’s response to any crisis of any real scale. Local governments, especially counties, often are at the hub of these networks. Planning for any emergency requires recognizing and acting on these two inescapable truths, before crises occur—and strengthening the capacity of the networks to respond to evolving crises.

Four Principles for Steering Outcomes



9. Solutions to crises require trust—but trust is hard-earned. When many people face great risk, they must trust those who lead response and recovery—or those interventions are severely impeded.



10. Experiments in the “laboratories of democracy” are great—but they are worthless without learning.

States and localities often help find solutions by trying a variety of different approaches to solving a problem. But ignoring the lessons learned across the states makes their experiments less productive. Governments at all levels can develop a far more sophisticated approach that views federalism on a continuum between national control and local flexibility—and can then determine which kinds of crises call for which kinds of action. The more sweeping and devastating the consequences, the greater need for federal steering of state and local action.



11. The nation faces inequities—and the pandemic helped to make the effects of inequity more transparent.

The pandemic revealed that without addressing social and economic inequities, disasters will harm huge segments of the population disproportionately—and that, in turn, can unravel the fabric of society. Heightened awareness may well lead to solutions at all levels of government, including sharing more resources with disenfranchised neighborhoods, hiring chief equity officers to keep issues of inequality in the forefront, ensuring that government data does not perpetuate racial bias, and using the power of public discourse soapbox to keep people from falling back into a state of ignorance. These actions are important far beyond COVID and can help to address problems of inequity during disasters and for obvious moral and ethical reasons.



12. Accountability is often the first casualty in a crisis—even when governments know the results of their efforts.

Holding institutions and individuals' accountable helps ensure responsible actions. This requires knowing exactly how to define and measure success. Accountability is a bedrock problem in dealing with crises, and their growing complexity makes that problem even worse. But solutions include coming to a consensus about the problem and developing measurements of performance that determine success or failure without placing broadscale blame on any individual player involved. "Gotcha" is not a helpful word to use in holding individuals and institutions accountable in a complex world.

Conclusion

What would have happened if the nation's leaders had been following all twelve of the preceding principles when the first cases of COVID were identified in China? No matter how closely they pursued the steps recommended in this report, there still would have been an enormous number of cases and deaths in the United States. However, the numbers would most likely have been substantially smaller than what the nation experienced. The country would have also likely emerged from the COVID crisis with far more trust in government's institutions. Crises will come and go, regardless of the lessons learned (or ignored). Good governance will not stop hurricanes, terrorists, floods, wildfires, heat waves, or cyberattacks from disturbing society's smooth functioning.

Improvements in the way government manages crises, however, can soften their impact in demonstrable ways, lessening their impact and abbreviating recovery.

The principal takeaway from all of these principles: Even in a nation consumed with politics, the other two facets of government—policy and management—make ambitious efforts succeed or fail, and profoundly shape the politics that surround crises. Applying most of these principles is not easy. Maintaining them as a crisis ebbs away may be even harder. In fact, once a crisis becomes a memory, it is often easy to forget the painful journey, to ignore the steps needed to prevent a recurrence, and to yearn for a return to a past that, almost always, has vanished forever.

Hope for applying the dozen principles spelled out in this paper relies on a fragile commodity—a long memory about the consequences of the past and a firm resolve to do better in the future. This paper sets forth details for building a new kind of national roof to protect from future unanticipated rainstorms. The key is to continue to keep the roof in good repair, even when the rain stops and the roof ceases leaking. That is the government that Americans deserve.

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