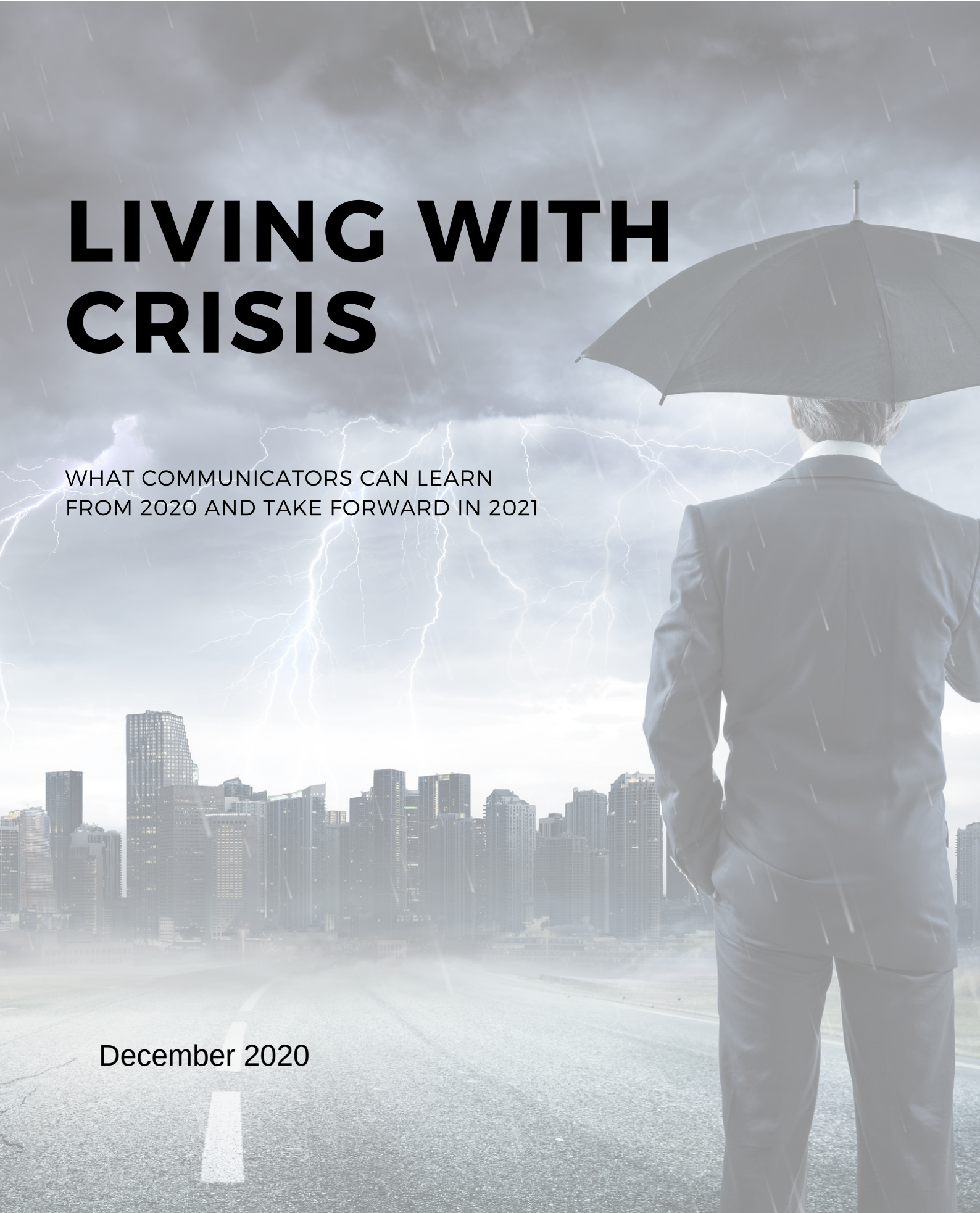


LIVING WITH CRISIS

WHAT COMMUNICATORS CAN LEARN
FROM 2020 AND TAKE FORWARD IN 2021

December 2020



INTRODUCTION

2020 has proved to be the most challenging year that the majority of people have ever lived through. The pandemic is far from over and the impact of it will last into the year ahead. What is important is that PR professionals and communicators take the learning from the experiences of the past 12 months and look at how they can develop, grow and be more resilient in 2021.

Every communicator has had to deliver some elements of crisis communication during the past year possibly with little or no training or experience in this area of work. There has been a huge amount of support made available from across the industry with access to advice through webinars, mentoring and volunteering.

It is essential now that we learn from the past and start to look at what the future may hold for communicators.

This crisis is not yet heading towards the recovery phase. So, what can we learn from 2020 that can help us to navigate our way into and through the coming year?

To help to answer the question I contacted crisis and risk communication experts from across the globe to gather their thoughts, advice, and insight. I asked several questions about what we can learn, what is needed going forward and how we can all get better at living with a crisis.

I am incredibly grateful for all those who provided me with their views on how to move forward.

One comment that came from everyone who took part was that 2020 had demonstrated the importance of communication to effective crisis management.

"This pandemic has reminded many of the value of effective communications – risk, crisis, employee, public – all were needed and continue to be needed throughout this pandemic."

SHAWNA BRUCE,
DIRECTOR BRUCE AND
ASSOCIATES LTD, USA

About Amanda Coleman Communications Ltd

Amanda Coleman Communication Ltd is a crisis, risk and resilience communication consultancy that was established by the experienced crisis communicator Amanda Coleman, Chart PR, FCIPR, FPRCA, author of the book *Crisis Communication Strategies*.

It is supported by a network of associates and has connections worldwide including in Canada, USA, Australia and Europe. The consultancy has links to the Centre for Risk and Crisis Communication and the Resilience Advisors Network. It provides a complete risk and crisis communication management services including preparation and development, immediate action, and debrief and recovery communication planning.



WHAT HAVE WE LEARNT FROM 2020?

"Covid-19 is not the first shock, nor will it be the last and in order to thrive, all organisations are going to have to think about risk, hazards and shocks a lot more creatively; those responsible for dealing with them must be taken seriously at board level."

Emily Hough,
Editor-in-Chief of The Crisis Response Journal

"...spend some time looking at how other countries are handling the situation - there might be international lessons learned."

Kjell Brataas,
Crisis communication author and senior communications
advisor,
Norway



WHAT HAVE WE LEARNT FROM 2020?

Crises do happen

Emergency plans, risk registers and business continuity have all been talked about, but this is the year that everyone and every business realised their importance. For many years there has been a level of certainty around our lives and the way they are, but 2020 has shown us that crises do arrive and emerge. More than that they can be big enough to impact on everyone. So, the theory of crisis communication suddenly became everyone's daily business.

There are no borders

The world became a smaller place as every country had to deal with the impact of Covid-19. It was clear that borders are artificial creations and that a virus can spread across the globe in a startlingly short period of time. As lives suddenly were moved online it became even easier to work closely with colleagues around the world. There has been a shared global experience and communicators came together in a way that has never been seen.

Honesty matters

It has been my first rule of crisis communication, and in fact all communication, for many years – honesty matters. Being truthful and open in communication during 2020 has been foundation for trust and confidence to exist. Where there has been an attempt to manipulate, to cover over issues, or to downplay something that has led to public outcry, it has had an impact on confidence in the institution involved. Honesty within crisis communication has proven once again to be essential.

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNT FROM 2020?

Crisis comms needs empathy

The impact of Covid-19 has gone way beyond physical health. The virus and the measures put in place to control it have impacted on mental health. Now more than ever we need to ensure that crisis communication is conducted with empathy. This is a new style of leadership and those that can combine demonstrating authority and action with empathy and humanity are surpassing others.

There is a need for speed

Crisis communication has always been about being able to respond quickly. In this 24/7 media world where everyone can be their own

publisher and information can be circulated worldwide at the touch of a button this has been reinforced. Communicators must be able to respond, mobilise resources and start to chart a way forward in an instant.

Plans must be fresh

When Covid-19 hit some businesses and organisations had crisis communication plans only to realise as they were about to implement them that they were out of date. Keeping plans updated and ready for use is essential. The shape of organisations will change, staff will arrive and leave, and the media landscape will continue to evolve. Crisis communication plans must be able to navigate a way through all these changes and continue to be fresh and relevant.



“A crisis can happen any time, and with social media and scrutiny from traditional media that can and will uncover wrongdoing, you need to be prepared and drilled.”

Kjell Bratass, crisis communication author
and senior communication advisor,
Norway

“All crises are predictable if we spend time thinking about our organisation. We may not know where, when and how, but the consequences of any crisis are entirely predictable. Whenever you see ‘unprecedented’ perhaps you should think ‘unprepared’.”

Donald Steel, crisis communication specialist,
UK

WHAT SKILLS DO COMMUNICATORS NEED?

Dealing with uncertainty is going to be something everyone must become more comfortable with, and in the world of PR and communication this can be problematic. Crisis and risk communication are going to be part of our lives as professional communicators for some time to come. Communicators need to ensure that they have the skills and training that will help them to be ready, willing, and able to deal with the future challenges.

- Risk management – communicators need to understand risk in all its forms, business risks, reputational risks, operational risks. A risk framework needs to be in place linking to the business and it needs to be part of daily considerations. Risk communication is where crisis can be addressed, mitigated, or managed.
- Crisis awareness – communicators need to understand key principles of crisis communication and what it means for their day-to-day work.
- Analytical skills – working with scientists and medical professionals has been essential in 2020 and being able to assess situations, gather complex information and create simplified clear messaging has been critical. Building analytical skills is important for professional development.
- Resilience – 2020 has tested everyone and has shown that we could all benefit from being more resilient to the ups and downs of life. As individuals we need to learn how to be more resilient to events and work and home, and businesses also need to build resilience to weather crises that may lie ahead.
- Flexibility – being able to adapt and change direction at a moment's notice is a skill communicators need in order to face the future. During 2020 it was characterised by the overused phrase 'pivoting'. Communication plans need to change, refocus, and develop to what is happening in the world around them.



WHAT SKILLS DO COMMUNICATORS NEED?

“Crisis communication is a sexy word that many are drawn to. I feel that a big piece missing in the communication discourse is risk communication. 80 per cent of this year has required risk communications. Be comfortable with risk communications.”

BENJAMIN MORGAN,
PRINCIPAL OF THE CENTRE
FOR CRISIS AND RISK
COMMUNICATIONS,
WORKING INTERNATIONALLY
AND BASED IN CANADA

- Behavioural science – the importance of communication that will both change and positively reinforce behaviour has been evident during the pandemic. It is an area of PR that is only just starting to come to the forefront, and it is vital that communicators learn what it means and how it may improve and support their work.
- Influencing – being able to challenge decision making and actions from senior management has always been at the heart of effective communication. In times of crisis having the skills to be able to influence discussions and decisions is critical. Being able to do it in a positive way is what matters.
- Evidence based communication – it may be crisis communication, but it still requires evaluation. The situation doesn't change when you are dealing with an emergency or critical incident. You need to know what works and why so that you can develop more effective communication that reaches the right audience and has the desired outcome.
- Empathy – dealing with a crisis may require planning, analysis and clear processes but underpinning it all needs to be a focus on people. The needs and requirements of the business should never overtake those of the people who have been affected. Building communication that has empathy in a crisis is critical to being effective.

WHAT TO AVOID

LYING

BUREAUCRACY

**SLOW
DECISION
MAKING**

**OWNING
TOO
MUCH**

**FOCUSING
ON THE
COMPANY**

**EXCLUDING
PEOPLE**

**OVER
PROMISING**

“focusing on your own or your company’s situation instead of on the public and those directly affected”

**MEETING
ALL
REQUESTS**

Kjell Brataas, crisis communication author and senior communications advisor, on what to avoid in crisis comms

“We would never send a firefighter into a burning building without the training to do the job, but we send communicators in to manage crises without a second thought and wonder why we don’t achieve success.”

Shawna Bruce, Director Bruce and Associates Ltd, USA

“People react differently to critical incidents. Humans are very good at adaptation.”

Felipe den Brok, Executive Director of Mayor’s office of emergency preparedness for the City of Atlanta, USA

HOW DO WE GET BETTER AT LIVING WITH CRISIS?

10 POINT PLAN

1. Be crisis ready
2. Plan, train, and drill
3. Understand risk communication
4. Have a positive outlook
5. Build personal resilience
6. Create resilient communities
7. Take breaks and ensure a work balance
8. Put people first
9. Show kindness
10. Get ready for the time post COVID-19 (post crisis)



Life is always changing, and we never know what may be around the corner. These are not things that we often think about but 2020 has brought them to the forefront of our minds. It is part of the reason why we have felt the pressure of dealing with the pandemic. But there are ways to become more accustomed to living with crisis.

I had many years working in the emergency services where crisis and risk were a daily issue, some of those elements can help all communicators to move forward.

The 10 point plan is focused on three elements preparation, resilience and wellbeing. The crisis communication experts consulted overwhelmingly felt that communicators had to get better at living with crisis. It had to start with understanding risk and how it impacts on communication, developing risk management frameworks and making it part of the daily business. This is the first step to being crisis ready.

Every business and organisation must have a crisis management framework and a clear crisis communication strategy. But it is more than that those plans need to be tested, and staff drilled just like we have with fire drills, so that whenever needed they know exactly what is required and can move quickly.

Building our own resilience is essential after a year that has pushed us to the edge. At the heart of this is taking a break, stepping away from the crisis, ensuring a balance in your life and wherever possible finding positive elements in each day. As well as looking after ourselves we need to look after others. It is important to put people at the heart of everything we do and show some kindness and tolerance to others. Remember there will be a time after the crisis and things pass so when you can start to look ahead.

“It was US President Theodore Roosevelt who said it first, and it still holds true today, ‘people want to know that you care before they care what you know’.”

Benjamin Morgan, Principal of the Centre for Crisis and Risk Communications, based in Canada and operating internationally.

“The sensibility of people has changed, and my advice is to look into having a more sensitive, careful and personal approach to crisis communication.”

Steff Berger, Managing Director of a company specialising in crisis management for events and conferences, Germany

WHAT NEXT?



Recommendations

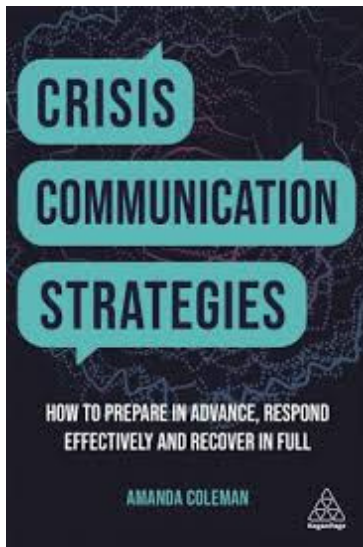
This has been a challenging and hugely difficult year for people. For communicators it has pushed them to the limit and put them under immense pressure. But there is also learning that we can take forward that will help to improve what we do in 2021 and the years ahead. From the knowledge and experience of the crisis communication experts and my own thoughts I have 10 recommendations for communicators to consider in 2021.

- Ensure you have up-to-date crisis communication plans
- Create a risk management framework within your communication team and make it part of daily business
- Prepare and test your plans so they can be implemented quickly
- Develop your personal resilience and have support mechanisms in place
- Review approaches and communication so that it has people at the centre
- Improve your analytical skills
- Make debrief part of your crisis response so you know what is working and why
- Build relationships within the business and with other agencies to support collaboration
- Sharpen influencing skills so you can challenge in an effective way
- Have a training plan that has crisis, risk, resilience, and recovery built into it

CONTACT



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More crisis communication advice is available in my book Crisis Communication Strategies.

<https://www.koganpage.com/product/crisis-communication-strategies-9781789662900>

Also in my regular crisis communication newsletter Under Pressure

<https://underpressure.substack.com>

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