

## Some communication advice for political leaders in Australia

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**Preface:** We are not experts on epidemiology, virology, or economics. Our personal view is that we need to opt for “[Endgame C](#)” and pro-actively isolate non-essential workers and children. We base our opinion on the [evidence](#) and [modelling](#) that we find most compelling. This is our view, but we acknowledge this is a wicked problem and there are no easy decisions.

We are also not experts on what actions need to happen now, but it is clear that the conditions need to be set so that people are able to actually follow leaders’ advice. For example, if leaders want people to self-isolate, they need to ensure that everyone who needs it can get food delivered, can apply for social-security payments from home, can get access to tele-health, etc.

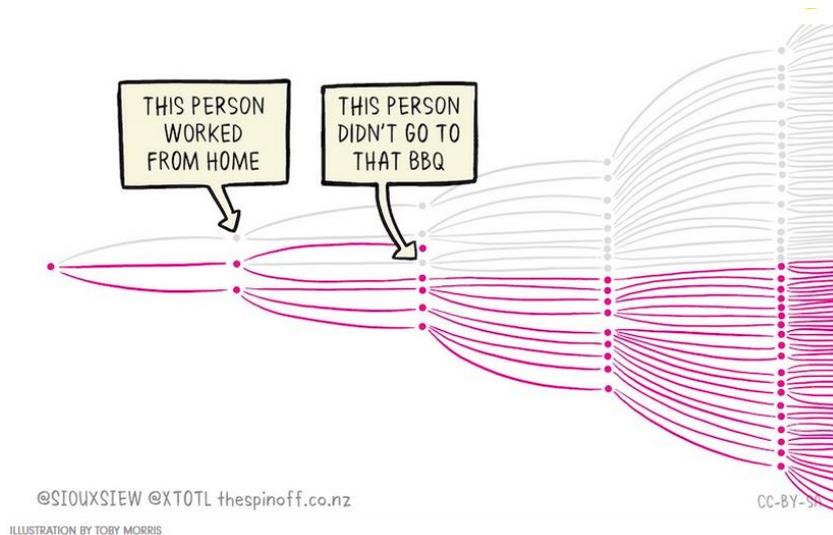
However, we do have expertise in the psychology of misinformation, communication, and behaviour change, so here we offer a few thoughts on how leaders should be engaging with the public.

- **Listening:** First, before thinking about communication, leaders should listen, not only to expert advice, but also to what the front-line needs, what the vulnerable people in the Australian society need.
- **Instructions:** People need to know what to do (specifically, unambiguously, and using simple language). “Stay home. Only go out for groceries if you must, once a week.” “You can go for a run if you keep >2m away from anyone else. You cannot do it as a group.” People will remain calm, if they have clear and simple guidelines about what actions to take.
- **Transparency:** Be accurate, honest, and transparent. People need to know why they are asked to do something. Don’t leave people guessing as this will make them more susceptible to misinformation and conspiracy theories. Telling people to calm down is implicitly stating that some people are in a panic, which can then create further panic. Likewise, don’t just tell people not to worry about food security or looming lock-downs, as some will believe that you are withholding information, which can encourage non-compliance and hoarding. Instead, explain what you are doing to manage these foreseeable issues. Even if the news is negative, share it transparently. [People can handle the truth](#), even when it includes communicating uncertainty. How many testing kits do we have? If we don’t act, how many people are expected to die? As long as people have honesty, people will not panic or fight. They will follow if they understand. Telling people to “just do it! / just stop it!” can cause defiance and backfire.
- **Certainty:** Give people as much certainty and reassurance as possible. Provide credible updates about health equipment and food security, explain any actions to increase support measures, provide assurances about how the economy will restart and flourish once the virus has been contained. People need to worry about being infected and transmitting the virus but not scared of the future. [Michael Bang Petersen calls this “optimistic anxiety”](#). If you

don't know specifics, admit it, but explain what you do know, how you will find the answers, and what concrete actions are being executed to look after people.

- **Outlook:** Give people an outlook; avoid surprises. "Case numbers will rise even if our measures are successful—the cases we see now are the infections from 5-10 days ago, so we have to wait that long to see the effects of our actions." "Schools remain open but children can now stay at home wherever possible. However, schools are likely to shut down if we reach X cases. Plan ahead now." Also explain the underlying rationale for any difficult decisions by putting it in the context of the alternative options. It's better to first outline what will happen if we don't take action (the worst-case scenario), before making the case for taking action. This will make a difficult decision more appealing and understandable. In other words, some pain now may be better than a lot of pain later. Set reasonable expectations regarding the duration of a lockdown. People will not fatigue if they understand it is necessary and they can mentally prepare.
- **Norms:** Use social norming. Highlight and praise the majority of those who are doing the desirable behaviour (e.g., staying home and not hoarding etc). "Everyone who can is staying at home. It's the right thing to do." But don't highlight the few minorities (e.g., defiant beachgoers etc), or you will risk encouraging more people towards that dangerous norm.
- **Innoculation:** Inoculate people, by proactively warning against emerging misinformation: "The following misinformation is currently being circulated: coronavirus is not serious; it only affects the old; there are easy treatments. Do not listen to every self-proclaimed expert. Consider where information has come from. What are the author's qualifications? Are they accountable to a reputable organisation? Might they have a hidden agenda? Is their reasoning sound? Don't share anything that you have not first fact-checked."
- **Motivation:** People are bad at understanding risks. They tend to disregard distant or future events (it's in China, it's in Italy; we only have X cases now, etc.) and underestimate risks to themselves. However, individual risk perceptions drive people's behaviour. Highlight that every adult in Australia is susceptible to having a life-threatening reaction to this disease, including young people. Every unnecessary physical contact will increase this risk and can lead to more lives lost. The pandemic will impact everyone: "Even if it's not you, it may be your partner, brother, sister, mum, dad, etc..." It is important to [get people to empathise](#), for example by using personal narratives of people of various ages who have been infected. One of the strongest behaviour predictors is one's [estimated risk of being infected](#). Explain: "Around the world, there are young and healthy adults with no known health problems on life-support. Everyone must act as if they are sick. Because if you are infected without symptoms, and you go out, your actions are going to kill people. You have a [responsibility for others](#)."
- **Agency:** Give people agency. "Every person in Australia has the capacity to help us beat this pandemic. We all need you to do your part. You can't control the virus but you can control your behaviour, and you can also influence the behaviour of your local community."
- **Decency:** Remind people to be human. "Look out for each other." Praise the people on the frontline and those doing the right thing. [Angela Merkel did a good job of this](#).

- **Graphics:** Provide good visuals of how people can break the spread and clarify that individual action is critical (and hopefully, down the track, to illustrate how aggressively reducing infections can lead to an exponential decrease in new cases). This ([animated gif here](#)) is perhaps the best we've seen:



- **Critical mass:** Push consistent messaging out hard on all channels all the time (TV ads, social media feeds, newspapers). This will also help regain trust.
- **Nudges and innovative environmental cues:** Evidence on handwashing shows that education and communication is not enough. It is important to place hand sanitisers and clear, colourful signage in strategic locations. Place dots on the ground at checkout lines to space people apart—once the first few people behave in accordance with the desirable norm, others will follow automatically. Incentives could be put in place to stay at home (e.g., voluntary technological tracking solutions may help to reward people for periods of isolation) and disincentives to go out (fines, reputational damage).