



SEVEN TESTS FOR ASSESSING CRISIS MANAGEMENT EFFECTIVENESS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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The coronavirus pandemic is putting both public healthcare systems and governance of countries around the world to the test. Just how the government responds to this challenge is of paramount importance, since people's lives are at stake and expectations are high. Therefore, an objective assessment is a precondition for increasing the quality and efficiency of governance.

In Armenia, such assessments are extremely biased. From the perspective of professional objectivity, there are three reasons for the shortcomings of most assessments.

1. Single-factor assessments

Reducing complex systems assessments to single-factor causality relationships is one of the most common challenges, even more so given the current pandemic.

2. Assessments based only on outcome indicators

Most of the key outcome indicators in the context of the coronavirus crisis are related to epidemiology, namely the number of infected people, the mortality rate, and the number of treated patients. Macroeconomic indicators can also assess the economic situation. The problem is that the outcomes are affected not only by public policy decisions but also by many other factors such as the initial conditions of multiple governance systems as well as social and psychological factors. These are typical problems of performance measurement. Therefore, balanced estimates should also include input indicators, which are far more difficult to measure.

3. Politically biased assessments

Political assessments are more prone to the distortion of reality, since the motives for filtering the facts from the point of view of partisan interests are quite strong.

Therefore, the need for professional evaluation is clear. How and by what criteria should such assessments be made? Here are seven key tests designed specifically for assessing a government's response to the current pandemic.

Test 1. Are managerial actions preventive or responsive?

A timely response is critically important for containing a pandemic. The uncontained spread of the coronavirus can follow an exponential pattern, but due to the initial small number of cases, the enormous expansive potential of the coronavirus may remain unnoticed. However, as the number of cases increases, so does the rate of expansion. In such situations, some overreaction is considered acceptable. The only way to manage a pandemic is by being a few steps ahead of it. This implies a comprehensive risk assessment, even before the outbreak in the country. It is extremely important at the onset to record the early signals of the spread of the virus as well as socio-economic changes, which can be done through mass testing and regular surveys among businesses and households, respectively. In terms of risk management, the rapid creation of excess infrastructure, resources, and capacities in healthcare, food security, and other areas are essential. Excess capacity is estimated based on demand during the peak of the crisis.

Test 2. Are the incentives adequate and do they address the desired targets?

Managing such crises involves influencing the behavior of broad and diverse social groups through incentives and sanctions. The effectiveness of interventions depends on the extent to which they affect the set goals. For this purpose, the motives behind the behavior of social groups should be examined, and the interventions should be powerful enough to influence the desired change in behavior. For instance, if it is deemed necessary for the public to wear masks, then incentives and penalties should reflect the main motives for deciding or refusing to wear a mask, such as public trust in its effectiveness, accessibility to everyone, inertia in mental models, and the adequacy of fines in proportion to perceived risk and average household income. However, the economic loss in the initial stage of this crisis is due to the restrictions of economic activities. Therefore, the incentives will address the core issues if they are aimed at compensating for lost income (i.e., unpaid salaries, lost turnover of businesses), rather than albeit important, but indirect targets (i.e., common social problems, such as increasing child benefits or compensating tuition fees for students).

Test 3. Is there a hyperfocus on solving the core problem?

In matters of life and death, hyperfocus and performance at maximum capacity are absolute prerequisites for winning. Winning in other areas will be rapidly devalued if the main battle is lost. This is the time when priorities must be radically defined and alternatives, no matter how important otherwise, must be rejected. In such situations, decisions to abstaining from acting in some areas very often become the most significant ones. Sometimes these are also the most difficult decisions, especially in public governance, where the demands are numerous, including those for political viability. Key factors include whether decision makers have mobilized their best human and institutional resources to address the core problem and whether they have silenced communication channels related to other issues.

Test 4. Do the decisions have scientific or expert validation?

The containment of a pandemic depends on many science-related aspects, from diagnostic and treatment problems and public health rules to economic modeling. Yet, politicians and state officials make the most important decisions. Optimal decisions involve scientific and expert assessments in the decision-making process. Equally important is the existence of politically independent scientific and research centers with good reputations that will inform society about the validity of decisions and thereby increase the public's confidence in them. Moreover, the simple translation of conclusions made by the international scientific community is not enough; the knowledge shall be internalized by taking into consideration local peculiarities.

Test 5. Are decisions feasible and strictly enforceable?

"Don't make decisions unless they are enforceable"—this general management principle is more than relevant in this context. It is a statistical fact that the main reason behind the failure of most strategies is their poor implementation. The implementation capabilities define the boundaries of feasible decisions. Decision makers must always ask themselves whether their decisions fall within or beyond these boundaries. In the context of containing the COVID-19 pandemic, many decisions, such as quarantine and lockdowns, are emergency measures and require rigid police enforcement. Otherwise, the effectiveness of their implementation falls sharply, which leads to a decline in trust and triggers a vicious cycle of non-conformance.

Test 6. Is the communication from the policy makers consolidating?

In authoritarian environments crises are overcome through ruthless top-down interventions, while in democratic systems they are managed through consolidation. In democracies, the content and style of communication used by leaders play a decisive role, since the prevailing narratives and messages are reproduced throughout society. Leaders must be prepared for asymmetric communication by consistently responding to intensifying criticism with public calls for consolidation and solidarity. Moreover, if the messages are contradictory, communication will be completely devalued.

Test 7. Is consistent feedback ensured?

In rapidly emerging crisis situations, information on the impact of decisions and the feedback from individuals, groups, and institutions affected by them ensure the adequacy of these decisions. How those responses contribute to the accumulation of new knowledge and its inclusion into the next phase of decision-making is significantly important. In general, crises require flawless absorption of knowledge, which is then used in making new decisions. The collective ability of managers to learn fast becomes more important than ever.

Discourses on the effectiveness of governance cover many of the issues presented above. However, they are very often biased, fragmented, confusing, and incomplete. These tests will help provide a sound, logical framework for the purposes of assessment.