



Lene Naesager, Director for Strategy and Corporate Communication, Directorate-General for Communication, European Commission, opened the webinar by giving an outline on its topic.

The coronavirus crisis changed the context of political communication, citizens are expecting a lot from communicators and politicians. There is a need to adapt to this and reconsider the communication activities in order to pass on messages in a clear way. Citizens want clarity and guidance, they need to feel trust in the institutions.

During the Digital Masterclass, the speakers from PM, **Stijn Pieters, Co-founder and managing partner** and **Dr. Hugo Marynissen, Senior partner**, gave an overview on how crisis communication could be tackled in the time of this crisis.

The main difference between political communication and crisis communication is that in political communications, we put forward our policies, and communicate them to the public and persuade to adapt them, or we defend or attack policies. In crisis communication, uncertainty is the key.

Based on Barry Turner's Disaster Incubation Theory, the speakers presented a "crisis cycle", which has the following six stages:

1. Plan
2. Incubation Period – The period when we start to drift from the original plan. We are always in a state of incubating a crisis situation. How we deal with this drift will determine how long we can survive.
3. Precipitating Event – The one thing that flips the whole case from risk to crisis.
4. Onset of the crisis – The phase where we get negative influences towards the recovery.
5. Rescue and salvage
6. Cultural readjustment – When we look back and learn from what had happened before we go into the next crisis.

There is always a short period of time when we can avoid the crisis in stage 3. In the case of the COVID-19 crisis, we had not taken the window of opportunity to do so.

During the masterclass, the following question was asked from the audience:

Which worldview do you adhere to the most?

1. The world is ordered but occasionally things become chaotic.
2. The world is chaotic but we manage to create oases of order.

29% of the audience voted no.1, while 70% voted 2.

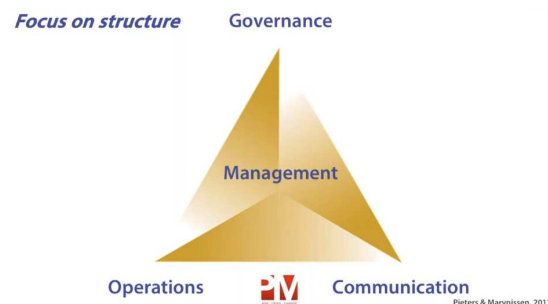
The COVID-19 crisis made us realise that we are surrounded by chaos, and we have to deal with this environment. This pandemic indicated that all of a sudden all our plans can be destroyed. Pieters and Marynissen shared that they had been looking at the Chaos Theory to understand this.

The speakers identified three types of problems:

1. Tame problems: these need a rational power, a manager providing the right process.
2. Critical problems: they need a coercive power, a commander providing the answer.
3. Wicked problems: They need emotional power, a leader asking the questions. According to Jeff Conklin, the issue with a wicked problem is that we only understand the very nature of the problem in the moment it is solved. There isn't really an answer on how to deal with it.

During a crisis, communicators and crisis managers try to act and work according to a plan prepared beforehand. However, reality is always different from what the plan is. In the COVID-19 crisis for example, we are trying to contain the pandemic and solve all its consequences as well.

The speakers presented a "Golden Triangle" of governance, operations, communications, and management aligning the three.



The key is separating the communication part from the governance and operations, this will help building a dependable structure. It is important to have a clear mandate for these domains in an organisation in a preparatory phase for a crisis. The three processes each have a different tempo. Crisis management is the alignment of these three processes in an information flow that helps out each domain. This is what is manageable in a crisis.

What is not manageable, is the many organisations communicating separately, it is a complexity of processes that are beyond our mandate. The idea of communicating with one voice in a crisis is, on a European scale, an illusion.

What needs to be done is perception or sentiment analysis and detecting what people are feeling and doing. It already gives a possible view on how to address uncertainties.

What we can do: looking at the communications from the expert view and having politicians support that expert view.

Marynissen presented the research they did during the pandemic, analyzing the network of the Port of Antwerp. They found that the Port authority took the lead and steered the network, which allowed them to speak with one voice in the end.

How to solve different types of problems:

- Simple problem: to solve this problem, it is enough to react and follow the plan.
- Complicated problem: in this case, we have to anticipate, but it's again a reactive process.
- Compound problem: when there are multiple aspects to a problem. We have to be trans-disciplinary, but it's still a reactive process.
- Wicked problem: as in this case we don't have a clear understanding on the nature of the problem, we have to anticipate and get trans-disciplinary, in solving the problem and in its communication as well.

The importance of identifying the needs and wants of the network: we need to know what the network is feeling and saying and how it influences other networks. We have to see the perception outside the organisation in order to match the crisis communication strategy with reality.