

## Crisis, Change, and Communication

By Ed O'Neil, Principal, O'Neil & Associates

*"You never let a serious crisis go to waste. And what I mean by that, it's an opportunity to do things you think you could not do before." Rahm Emanuel, on the 2008 financial crisis*

**A**fter a year plus of the COVID-19 pandemic, I offer this quote to remind us that any crisis of this magnitude will produce change, one way or the other. So, best to take full advantage of it. In this piece, we'll explore five questions to consider any time a leader is communicating about a change.

**1. What is the change?** There are all sorts of competitors for where to begin communication in times of change or crisis. But why not feature the most important element right at the get go, when the audience is most focused and least confused. Besides, it is the question they are most interested in having answered so they can stop worrying about the change and listen to all that you can share. The explanation should be simple and direct.

*"Responding to the current situation, we will move to conduct all work using technologies that let us maintain social distancing."*

*"The new challenge we must meet means we will move the majority of patient care to telemedicine interactions."*

*"Because of this situation, we will need to reduce staffing on new projects and allocate them to the crisis response."*

This part of the communication needs to be as clear and focused as you can make it. There are certainly going to be unknowns, and these will inevitably mean that the way ahead will need to be adjusted as new things arise. In times of change this is reality, so better to acknowledge it. It will be helpful to commit yourself to keeping them informed as new information is available and the course shifts.

**2. Why are we doing this?** The real opportunity of change in times of crisis is that you do not need to spend much time putting this in context or offer justifications.

*"We have a government mandate."*

*"We want to keep all of our staff as safe as possible."*

*"Given other demands the resources have to be reallocated for now."*

Behind each of these is a complex or fairly straightforward decision process that should be a part of the explanation, but details in these moments are probably not too helpful. What is needed is decisive action that has been informed by all relevant constituencies, information, and constraints, and an explanation that is just as clear and straightforward.

**3. What is the upside?** There is always an upside.

*"We still have work to do."*

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### Leadership Tips

*Leadership Tips* is an ongoing series produced by the Center for Health Care Strategies' Medicaid Leadership Institute in collaboration with O'Neil & Associates. The series is designed to provide general guidance to help leadership of state agencies and their senior managers develop and refine the skills and expertise necessary to successfully lead their state programs. To view the full series, visit [www.chcs.org/leadership-tips](http://www.chcs.org/leadership-tips).



*“We have the opportunity to play an essential role.”*

*“This provides us a chance to do something — telecommute, consolidate services, provide telemedicine, work with a new collaborator — that we have been wanting to do for a while.”*

Your description of the upside should be real, tangible, and at least somewhat familiar to the audience. They may not all see it this way, but this is your first step at putting the change into a positive context. Being positive does not mean stretching the truth or offering uninformed opinions.

**4. What is the downside?** Be honest about the pain. If there may be layoffs, say so. Be as specific as possible. Do not sugar coat the pill. Give the best estimate of the impact on the organization and individuals within it. There are two elements leaders need to always add to grim news. First, the impact, whatever it is — extra work, downsizing, need to change, reduced budgets — is a collective burden to bear and all will participate in one way or the other. Second, decisions will be made in a manner that is consistent with the core values and culture of the organization, which are hopefully clear and understood by all.

**5. How do we move forward?** This part is very important and often fails to make it into the first communication of change. It should provide the general process and specific details of the next steps that will be pursued. It has two dimensions. First, it is a more detailed statement of what the change is about but is more operational. Additionally, this part of the communication provides guidance on how the audience is to move forward with this change. It will be important for everyone to take responsibility for questioning and adjusting the change as the process moves forward. Everyone will need to assume the role of problem solver, not merely critic. The messages here should be about collective ownership, positive attitude, and dedicated teamwork.

Any communication about a big change should be complete but as focused as possible. The message should be conveyed in a manner that exhibits the values that it is attempting to call out and focus on the challenge.

## About Ed O’Neil

Ed O’Neil, PhD, MPA, is the owner of O’Neil & Associates, a management consulting and leadership development firm focused on change and renewal in the health care system. He was previously professor in the Departments of Family and Community Medicine, Preventive and Restorative Dental Sciences, and Social and Behavioral Sciences (School of Nursing) at the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF). At UCSF, he served as the director of the Center for the Health Professions, a research, advocacy, and training institute that he created in 1992. His work over the past three decades has focused on changing the US health care system through improved policy and leadership. To learn more, visit [www.oneil-and-associates.com](http://www.oneil-and-associates.com); contact Ed O’Neil at [herringoneil@gmail.com](mailto:herringoneil@gmail.com).

## About the Medicaid Leadership Institute

The *Medicaid Leadership Institute*, an initiative of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation led by the Center for Health Care Strategies, helps Medicaid directors develop the skills and expertise necessary to successfully lead their state programs in an ever-changing policy environment. In addition, CHCS *Medicaid Academies* provide policy and leadership training for senior Medicaid staff as well as colleagues across partnering state and county agencies. Ed O’Neil has advised numerous MLI Fellows and Medicaid senior managers over the past decade. To learn more, visit [www.chcs.org/medicaid-leaders](http://www.chcs.org/medicaid-leaders).

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