

## Coming together while standing apart

### Encouraging community ownership during the isolating days of a pandemic

On March 13, 2020, I received a text message from a friend and colleague named Lisa Cox. Lisa and I had worked together at Mercy Hospital during the Joplin tornado and I later convinced her to join me at the City of Springfield. She became the Public Affairs Officer for the Springfield Police Department for several years. I was in Branson on a rare day off, shopping with my husband and daughter, when her text came in.

“Here we go...,” she texted on March 13. As the Chief Communications Officer for the Missouri Department of Health & Senior Services, she was notifying me that we had our first confirmed case of COVID-19 in Greene County.

It seemed totally unfair that it happened so quickly, but nonetheless, while I felt the anxiety of the events pre-destined to follow, I did not feel panicky. Only seven days prior, the Springfield-Greene County Health Department convened our first multi-disciplinary, multi-organizational task force meeting. Having spent 18 years at Mercy communicating about important health issues, including H1N1, and nearly 8 years communicating on behalf of the local government, I felt a small sense of comfort in that I knew the players, I understood the medical science and I felt that there was not another County Health Department in the country that I trusted more than our own Springfield-Greene County Health Department.

Lisa’s follow-up text perplexed me, though. “It’s like the Joplin tornado is hitting us again, but every. single. day.” I thought, “What has happened to Lisa? Why is she being so dramatic? Together, we had helped our communities come to grips with, and ultimately heal from, many tragedies, and we did so by remaining calm, being straight forward, honest and empathetic. This would be surely just another one of those times.”

It would be several weeks before I could understand Lisa’s comments and comprehend that this is NOTHING like any of those times we had experienced before. And at the heart of it for me was teaching others that a pandemic is a communications emergency in addition to being a medical crisis.

Throughout the following seven months, the City of Springfield, whom I serve as the Director of Public Information and Civic Engagement, and the Springfield-Greene County Health Department have made communication a priority in every sense of the word. But, I’m not going to lie. It has been difficult. The fight against misinformation felt personal to me. It *still* feels personal to me. If I’m not doing everything I possibly can to inform and educate our citizens, I feel like I am literally putting their lives at risk. That’s the heaviness of it. Janet Dankert, CEO of Community Partnership of the Ozarks, cried with me on the phone one night, terrified that a lack of funding would put highly vulnerable homeless people back on the streets with little protection from COVID. That’s the heart of a nonprofit leader. A community leader.

From hosting more than 100 live news briefings, to facilitating dozens of heated public hearings at City Council, to broadcasting four virtual town hall television specials, my communication team and I at the City of Springfield, Missouri have been front and center during the biggest public health crisis in our lifetimes.

I will admit it. I'm an emotional person. But I don't think I, or any of us, should be ashamed of being emotional. In fact, I think we should embrace it. Emotions -- are sometimes in short supply these days, and the last thing we need are leaders who cannot feel. In a crisis, the importance of acknowledging emotions caused by uncertainty cannot be overstated. While decisions are based on facts and a thorough analysis of consequences, communication must occur with an understanding of the impact of decisions.

Despite the high level of fear associated with the pandemic, and the very real reasons to be concerned about the future, I do believe, however, that the default position we should communicate is realistic optimism. That is the tone I have tried to strike in all of my communication work throughout this crisis. As Arthur Brooks described in the Atlantic: "Humans like to feel optimistic about, and in control of, where life is headed. The pandemic has made it very hard to feel that way."

Nonprofit organizations, local governments and service providers in general (both public and private) are entrusted with the protection our collective soul. Across our nation, communities are struggling not just to survive this outbreak, but to optimistically look ahead at possible positive changes that could permanently change the world as we know it. We serve life-saving functions providing key human services. Unfortunately, we are faced with shrinking revenues, increasing demand, staff cutbacks, the fog of uncertainty and the added trauma of the negative impact of short- and long-term social isolation on the people we serve.

Because of the pandemic, the future feels difficult and uncertain, and few of us have much control over it, beyond doing our best to keep ourselves informed and those around us safe. The result is a lot of unhappy people. Gallup survey [data](#) show that pessimism about the future of the pandemic in the U.S. is rising. This is infecting our general outlook.

But, there is a silver lining. New York Times writer David Brooks reminds us "This is a time to practice aggressive friendship with each other -- to be the one who seeks out the lonely and the troubled." It is also true that character is revealed at times like this. People see deeper into themselves, bravely learning what pain can teach us and, hopefully, through the stoic response to not only the coronavirus pandemic, but also the long-needed response to the devastating pandemic of systemic racism, we will all become wiser and more compassionate as a result.

I knew going into the pandemic that trust had already been eroding: trust of institutions – the government – the church – educational institutions and the media. We have even become more distrustful of one another. And that it is a major problem. It has led to confusion and division that makes coalition building and positive change extremely difficult. One answer lies within increased civic engagement because when people are engaged, they feel more

ownership of their community and feeling a sense of ownership is key. In Southwest Missouri, we are known for collaboration and a very strong bonding social capital, but what about that bridging social capital? We tried to continue our focus on how to improve our relationships with those who are very different from us and building trust among us in a way that helps prepare people for months to come.

I was shocked to learn in a recent meeting that the word “Unity” has become a trigger word for some. I was shell-shocked. As a communicator, I pride myself on providing careful use and placement of words because despite what some people say to the contrary: words matter. Thankfully, the friend and colleague who shared that sentiment, was willing and able to unpack that for me a little bit. “The word unity can be misused and speaks loudly to me that there is a nuance telling me I must compromise my political values and cross lines that my religious beliefs and ethos simply cannot accept.” I had never, ever thought of it that way. “That’s not what we mean by unity, several people responded.” It was an eye-opening moment to say the least, but it reminded me of another important piece of advice so simple that many of us forget it: listen first, speak later. By listening to this comment, I suddenly understood the misunderstanding. I think I will be better at coalition building having this insight.

I believe there are certain actions that will help all of us build trust: telling the truth; trusting others; connecting in new ways that build community ownership and keep showing up!

### **Tell the Truth**

When faced with a crisis, we have two options: we can offer false reassurance, draw hard lines and scold one another for believing one way or the other and hope that reality doesn’t prove us wrong down the road. Or, we can prepare ourselves and one another for an uncertain future with candor, empathy, humility and honesty. In the latter, I believe that we can earn back trust.

As a part of the communications team working to address not only the medical pandemic, but also the inter-related pandemics of systemic racism, economic distress and impending mental health crisis, I am part of a team that includes multiple City departments and disciplines, including my Department of Public Information & Civic Engagement, the Health Department, the Police Department, the Planning Department, the Office of Emergency Management and the office of the Mayor. A very close partnership also exists with the local hospital systems, mental health providers, secondary and higher education institutions, faith-based organizations, the business community and of course, the non-profit social service sector.

A main tenant of our communications strategy has been telling the truth and telling it often across multiple platforms in many different ways. Access to accurate information has been an obsession of ours. The national stage scared me to death. I initially tuned it out, focusing on what local and regional experts that I knew personally had to say and needed to share –a health department I had trusted my entire life and doctors I have worked with for decades. I knew that THEY relied on reliable sources for information on which to base decisions. I felt I could take that information to the bank...and to the public.

Our County Director of Public Health, Clay Goddard, became a reluctant high-profile public figure throughout the pandemic and continues to be an important voice in our region. I think the single most common crisis communication mistake is over-reassuring messages. For frightened people and especially for people whose unbearable fear have pushed them into denial, Clay struck the right tone – which is somewhere between gentle and matter-of-fact: scary realities presented without scary theatrics. This approach is not universally accepted, but I can tell you that it almost universally works. This may seem to contradict my earlier advice to default to optimism, but remember it is a realistic optimism we are going for here. Some believe you should downplay bad news. I disagree. Telling bad news does not always mean your organization or your community will be perceived as bad. Levelling with the public allows you strength from which to recruit help and build trust and coalitions.

Also - **Trust the local media**. The local media has been an absolute Godsend. Having a relationship with them for over 30 years continues to pay off for me and the efforts of the City and Health Department. My advice is **do not wait** until there's a crisis to develop relationships with anyone. There is truth to the contention that our media habits and the response by national media outlets to address our insatiable need for instant gratification and entertaining news, **has contributed** to our divisive culture. But there has not been a more important time for us to seek out and support unbiased and reliable journalism than there is **right now**. In Springfield, we have a great, local news corps.

Media literacy is so incredibly important right now. People are generally confused and lost between fact and fiction. It actually threatens our democracy. Drury University professor Dr. Jonathan Groves has a great presentation explaining media literacy: the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and act using all forms of communication. [The Institute for Media and Public Trust](#) is a solid source dedicated to finding solutions to the “fake news” crisis and helping to bridge the trust gap between news consumers and media outlets.

I have spent a fair amount of time correcting misinformation online and pointing people to known objective media sources related to the pandemics of COVID-19 and systemic racism. I hope that it is helpful, but I warn that standing up to this phenomenon is not for the faint of heart. I have had complaints and at least one anonymous letter written to my boss, questioning my integrity and threatening me, for simply pointing our objective news sources and answering people's questions with the facts. I think the reason for that is an insidious information virus to which we are all susceptible -- confirmation bias. Confirmation bias is the inclination to digest information and news that already fits into your current point of view, reinforcing attitudes and beliefs you already have, at the exclusion of open mindedness. To avoid media confirmation bias, encourage those around you to actively seek out reliable information from a variety of expert sources and challenge yourself to listen to, and understand, different points of view and even different ideas about how we can all best survive these challenging times.

Early on in this crisis, Clay emphasized that we are all in this for the long haul. That this would not be gone by the end of summer, the end of the fall, or even the end of the year. These are words that were very difficult to hear back in March 2020 when we had to issue stay-at-home

orders to help slow the spread of the virus and buy time for area hospitals to scale up. But it was the truth. The hard and difficult truth and sound medical science.

Warnings about the long duration ahead of this pandemic were repeated in our briefings because our public deserved the truth. It reminded me a historical situation. In 1942, just after the British defeated the Germans at Alamein, driving them out of Egypt, Prime Minister Winston Churchill famously said, “Now this is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning.”

That was a moment where we realized there was a way to combat the virus. There was a little more clarity. We knew what we were fighting: a deadly virus and misinformation that could cause death and illness. The public doesn't need fearless leaders; it needs role models of leaders bearing their own fear. People can handle the truth and the fact is, they deserve it. Leaders get criticized no matter what they do. In my experience, however, people also rise to the occasion to meet expectations when calls to action are clear and they serve the common good.

When we were able to elicit empathy from viewers, appealing to their sense of community (on social media and through mainstream media), we noticed that it also shored up support to complying with necessary safety regulations. Hearing stories directly from people via testimonials about their loved ones elicited the most empathy. These were the stories of people whose loved ones had suffered or died from COVID and also stories about the interviewees themselves who personally contracted and fought the virus.

**Connect and engage people in new and increasing ways that build ownership.** People crave connectivity more than ever, perhaps because we have been forced into at least partial isolation, with the gathering traditions we have come to love being stripped from us because they are also a means to make us sick. I hope that we are really realizing the pain of social isolation, particularly by senior citizens who are too often forgotten and de-valued.

We created weekly opportunities to interact and engage with us virtually and went to extreme lengths to get out the word about these opportunities. This included working with the media to promote programs, producing public service announcements in multiple formats and leaving information packets on residents' doorsteps. At the heart of our messaging was a call to action to do the right thing, be a part of the greater good, own OUR community. Despite the chaos at the federal and even state level, we believed and were right, that we control our own destinies. We received help at every turn from people we “owned” their community and were subsequently more invested. That helped to build resiliency: a fortress of fortitude.

It really is up to ALL of us, working together, to come together and making a conscious decision to be resilient. The key is being creative and flexible. For example, I don't think any of us would be as videoconference savvy if we were not forced to rethink how we can do things to involve more people across technology platforms. This constraint also made us understand how difficult it can be for people with disabilities to fully participate in our community.

I am the proud co-creator of the Give 5 Civic Matchmaking program with Greg Burris, President and CEO of United Way of the Ozarks and former Springfield City Manager. Pre-pandemic, we realized the extreme level of social isolation right here in our community. We went virtual in fall of 2020 – not surprised that we have many people wanting to connect with volunteer opportunities – just safe and socially distanced ones! During the pandemic, we were able to reach out to our Give 5 graduates, specifically querying our database of alums, finding those who had medical, public relations or call center experience. They made for very good call center operators.

**Keep Showing Up.** We live in a world where technology can connect us in the blink of an eye and yet, we too often do not see. We have more ways than ever to hear one another, yet we too often do not listen. Without seeing and hearing one another, it is hard to build trust, and without trust, it's too easy to retreat to our bubbles or tribes. Us vs them. Red vs blue. Men vs women. Church vs state. Let's not do that. Let's unite in the truest sense of the word: come or bring together for a common purpose or action.

One struggle in this Tik-Tok, Snapchat, "fake news," social media era is that the work to address these pandemics is difficult, with few immediate improvements and, as David Brooks most aptly describes – it is all the boring, dogged work that is more C-Span than Instagram. It is about building relationships and helping everyone understand that, although it sounds cliché, we really are all in this together. Our individual actions, or inactions, affect the trajectory of the virus spread. It is a proposition that is both inspiring and frightening. A fundamental tenet is that any successful communication regarding the virus MUST ignite the feelings of community ownership. This became increasingly difficult as national rhetoric identifying the virus as a "hoax" and stoked fear across the country.

But life is sometimes mysterious and full of pleasant surprises. Throughout the craziness of the pandemic, there has been one constant in my life, and it is a man named Erik Richards. He is one of the City of Springfield and the Springfield-Greene County Health Department's biggest critics, mostly because of our masking requirements. It is not exaggerating for me to say that I would go to bed each night over the past nine months after reading angry messages from Erik and wake up to them again the next morning. He posed a lot of questions that I think we faithfully answered to the best of our ability.

Then something happened. He read a newspaper story about former Springfield City Councilman Tommy Bieker passing away. The newspaper account shared that Tommy had reached out to me in July, wanting to help create awareness about the importance of masking and social distancing. Tommy didn't think masking should be political and believed that it might be helpful to show how someone like him, a self-described staunch conservative, could support a masking requirement. We were not able to finish the PSA we were working on together because he began losing his battle with leukemia. But in the days before his passing, he felt such a strong sense of ownership of his community that he texted me again, apologizing for not finishing the PSA and sharing his love for the community. He remembered the good times he

and I had together and asked me to share his wish:

" 1) I ask everyone to [#maskup417](#) and 2) love each other, it's the little things that count and finally, 3) we are literally the best community ever and you are what makes it great. Love you Cora, going to miss the hell outta the team!!"

I did share Tommy's final message with the community he loved.

Erik said he and Tommy had similar views on politics and although they didn't know each other, they had gone to high school together. When he saw that Tommy had tragically died and saw per the news report that his wish for everyone was to mask up, he thought there was no better way to honor him than to do something so easy as to put on a mask ("even if I disagree or do not like it").

So, he started thinking and talking to his wife. "Honey, what do you think about us masking up for 100 days." She was stunned. "I tried to take down all the anti-mask crap and changed," said Erik. "Had I not seen that story on Tommy, then I probably would not have tried to change."

Erik hopes that this challenge will take off like the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge, with people agreeing to mask up for 100 days and to nominate 15 people they think will mask up, too. His challenge became [#MaskUpForTommy](#).

He still doesn't agree with the City of Springfield passing an ordinance requiring masking and he is worried the backlash he will get from other anti-maskers, which started immediately and was just as hateful as his earlier posts. He has apologized profusely, and I believe it to be sincere. His connection to Tommy and a sense of remorse that his actions could possibly have hurt others and our community-at-large, led him to feel a sense of ownership and responsibility. He now really believes, though, that it's important we all come together, despite our differences of opinion. He has done a 180-degree, saying he now sees the bigger picture and wants to do something to help his community and fellow citizens, despite his own discomfort and personal objection. I am 100% sure that this is EXACTLY the kind of thing that Tommy Bieker would have wanted to happen. And that makes Erik Richards very happy.

