

2/2020

APRIL 2020
WWW.RSOG.COM.MY

RSOG INSIGHT

MOVEMENT CONTROL ORDER EDITION

IN THIS ISSUE

With the COVID-19 impacting countries at various stages, everyone is trying to understand what is required to protect themselves and their communities.

We spoke to some of our friends around the world, on how it has affected them and their views of the situation.

ABOUT OUR GUEST

Dr Paul Porteous is the Director of the Centre for Social Leadership in Australia, developing innovative programmes across government, business and community sectors. A former senior diplomat and international lawyer, Paul has been both Visiting Faculty at Harvard Kennedy School and a Fellow at Harvard's Center for Public Leadership where he received the 'Dean's Award for Excellence in Student Teaching'.

Paul is a leadership theorist and practitioner focusing on collectively exploring innovative solutions to complex contemporary problems. He encourages us to stop waiting for heroes to save us from our problems, speak up when things are not working, develop a clear sense of purpose about values and direction and create a sense of possibility on critical issues.

He is also currently Adjunct Professor at the Institute for Governance and Policy Analysis, University of Canberra.

VIEWS FROM AUSTRALIA

In this edition, we spoke to Dr Paul Porteous, who has been instrumental in delivering RSOG's Senior Leadership Programme (SLP): Navigating Adaptive Leadership and Emerging Leaders Programme (ELP): Strategic Stakeholder Engagement.

RSOG: How has the pandemic affected your daily life?

Dr Paul Porteous: Quite significantly as most of my teaching and consultancy work is face-to-face, working with group dynamics and the underlying issues of people's leadership challenges. My wife is a musician and all her concerts have been cancelled and I have two teenage children at home as schools are closed. So, we are in a position similar to many as we adapt to a new set of challenges, work and home life.

RSOG: Much of your work emphasises on one's leadership challenge. What is a leadership challenge and how can leaders relate to the current circumstances?

Dr Paul Porteous: With about 40,000 definitions of leadership, how you define a leadership challenge becomes important, especially when dealing with complex and evolving issues such as the coronavirus which has unique health, social, economic and political interactions. In these situations, it is important to make a sharp distinction between technical challenges (solved through expertise and past experiences) and adaptive challenges (underlying dynamics which require a new evolutionary step in problem-solving processes). Right now, coronavirus is a mix of both challenges - we need expert technical work to develop strategies for mitigation and vaccines but also extraordinary leadership in learning to adapt to a new reality. That leadership is about learning and experimentation to help people make informed choices about how (cont.)

Disclaimer: Views expressed in the article are of their own and do not reflect the opinion of Razak School of Government.

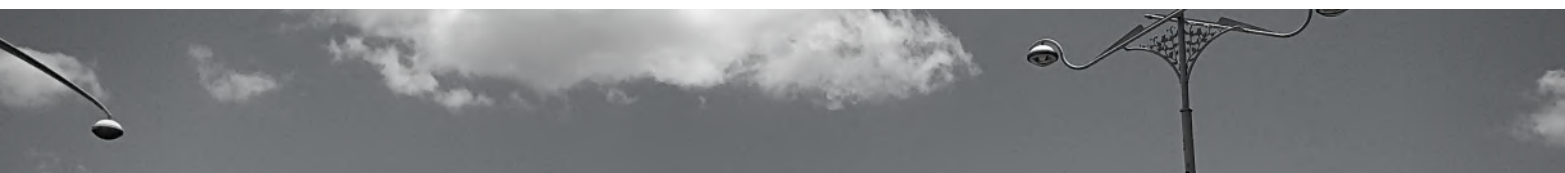


they act in a broader community context. Many people will find both their work teams and home life disrupted and dealing with the emotional side of that disruption is also critical – mutual support and a common purpose frees people up to experiment with new ideas and new possibilities which are required at this time.

There is a particular challenge for politicians to help provide direction, guidance and order but too many have reacted in ways that have increased uncertainty by simply dismissing the pandemic as a hoax, media hysteria or over-reaction. Many have realised too late that actions should have been taken earlier. The impact may be as significant as a World War or Great Depression. What is at stake is not just immediate responses – what is really at stake is far more fundamental in terms of its effects on a whole generation. In the short-term, we need to work the critical, urgent issues which means it is essential to concentrate on the number and vectors of infections, likely exponential growth and potential medical breakthroughs. We also have to start dealing with immediate complex values questions: What does it mean to act fairly in these situations? Who gets priority access to medical services? What are our rights, responsibilities and obligations as citizens in not spreading the virus? How might vaccinations, food and essentials be distributed equitably?

Longer-term, once the immediate crisis is over, good leadership will be needed to explore the origins of the pandemic: Why voices highlighting the potential crisis were ignored or silenced? Why some nations reacted so slowly or ignored health experts' advice? Why different levels of government contradicted each other? And why it has taken so long for an international coordinated approach? We will need to explore why the government has been diminished over the past decades to a point it is unable to quickly respond in a coordinated way across sectors to such emergencies. It will mean reimagining the role of government as distinct from the primacy of markets, the economy, and the private sector. It will require difficult conversations around what political system reforms are required to attract the best and most talented and experienced people to politics, rather than just those who have shown loyalty to a particular faction and have little experience outside of political factional games.

These are very deep questions around values, culture, power, truth, relationships and collaboration. History suggests it is easy to ignore these questions once the core crisis is over (similar to the Global Financial Crisis, where business as usual returned to much of Wall Street). However, good leadership will initiate these deeper questions in order to build better capacity in our communities to respond to future crises. Living in an interdependent world where decisions in one nation affect others, the greatest risk will be if we avoid these difficult conversations.



RSOG: Based on what you've seen happening with regards to the global pandemic, are there themes emerging that you feel reflect the leadership challenge that an individual, organisation, government or a country has?

Dr Paul Porteous: The biggest leadership challenge at the moment is around trust and how people relate to authority. Trust in government has been plummeting for years. Around the world, many people view government actions with suspicion. That fracture of trust in authorities has now extended to business, media and virtually any large organisation. In the absence of trust, people turn to alternatives such as social media rumours or community gossip. Ironically, truth has become a major casualty at a time when it is needed most. People are confused about where to even find facts. A recent Australia survey found only 19% of people strongly trusted the information about coronavirus provided by the government. (cont.)



This breaks down the cooperation needed for urgent collective action. That lack of trust has been reinforced by delays, inconsistency and confusion in advice and a feeling that decisions are rushed and not well considered. Trust will only be built through a government being open and honest with its people. Relying on and using experts to communicate is also essential and there is a need to resist politicians trying to take the limelight away from experts. Clearly explaining what is being done, why it is being done, what might happen, and the likely consequences is a better starting point.

Reflecting on my experience in Madagascar (as Senior Adviser to the President), we were faced with multiple health crises including the plague, widespread malaria and natural disasters from cyclones to drought. In engaging with the population, we were committed to open communication and honest in admitting what was still unknown. However, we were also clear about explaining what we were doing to find out and the actions we were taking in the interim. Importantly, we explained why we were doing what we were doing as a way of building trust. We wanted people to understand what our thinking was in making decisions and build respect for why those decisions were being made. This gets buy-in and also opens the way for groups to contribute to our thinking – to come up with different perspectives, whether it is local farmers, health workers or the World Health Organisation.

As this pandemic unfolds, weaknesses across sectors will accelerate. The breakdowns in the health sector will lead to breakdowns in the economic sector which will lead to breakdowns in the political sector and potential civic destabilisation. The need for openness and honesty to build trust will increase. Government actions will be scrutinised and they will be held accountable for the consequences of their actions. Yet many governments seem unprepared for foreseeable events and even surprised when there is an exponential increase in the need for hospital beds and equipment or that closing borders and locking down populations leads to mass unemployment.



RSOG: One of the important elements of one's leadership challenge is engagement with the community. In times of complexity and uncertainty, how crucial is this?

Dr Paul Porteous: Vital. If the community is not on board then it all falls apart. While the government needs to take a pro-active approach to coordination and bringing sectors together, it is not a one-way street. Engagement is about getting the buy-in from communities for action and that means constantly listening to local concerns, to diverse perspectives across sectors, and providing clarity and certainty in communication. At the outbreak of coronavirus, many voices of doctors and health care workers were ignored. While there is a balance between generating the extremes of panic or complacency, a health pandemic emergency is about life and death decisions and people need to be fully informed and engaged. It is not an election campaign around politics. Too many politicians have defaulted to "telling" people what to do, barking out orders like a military General, instead of engaging them in what is a shared dilemma. And populations are not soldiers – where trust is in short supply, they will ignore or even subvert these messages. There is no point in urging people to "follow" you when you don't know where you are going – no one knows. Instead, leadership is about creating the space to work together on this shared challenge. We should be discussing what "we" do about "our" problem, not preaching to people about how "they" should behave. In the absence of clear reasons, people are unlikely to conform to directives. Italy's experience is a sobering one – more than 100,000 people have been fined for breaching quarantine – because they did not trust the information from the government, which led to complacency. Until it was too late.



RSOG: In your opinion what are the key leadership lessons that we can learn from this global pandemic?

Dr Paul Porteous: 1) Bring the community together: This is a time for inclusion, reinforcing stakeholder relationships, and valuing diverse views as people work difficult issues together, especially at a local level. Break down barriers which are obstacles to progress. Barriers such as public/private, progressive/conservatives, urban/rural. These barriers have not helped in increasing our capacity to solve the coronavirus pandemic but rather have created or reinforced divisions.

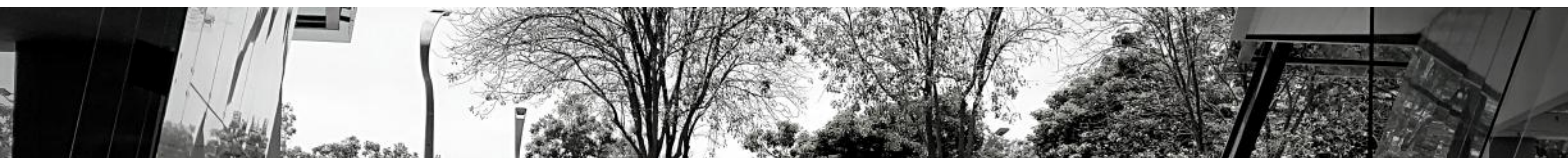
2) A shared problem requires shared action: It is not just a government problem, a particular group's problem or one country's problem. Lives are at risk and individual actions do affect others. Transparency in decision making, engaging experts and clarity in communication will build confidence and lead people to act differently. There is a need to change mindsets from "what's in it for me?" to "how do we build community?"

3) Respect the people: Acknowledge the ability of the population to rise to the challenge and reinforce where they are doing it right. Telling people what to do without explaining "why" is a disaster in the making. Those in positions of authority need to speak with truth and honesty about what is known and not known. The role of authority is also to provide a focus for people's emotions. For example, to reduce panic buying and hoarding, build reassurance by publicly bringing together senior politicians and supermarket CEOs to demonstrate there are no shortages and that the logistics are all working to deliver goods to stores and markets. People make informed choices - they don't react well to simply being told what to do.

4) Celebrate those helping others: Build a sense of community by highlighting the extraordinary acts of leadership at a local level as groups come together to provide support for the most vulnerable. For example, more than 750,000 people have volunteered to assist the National Health Service in the UK. Thank those on the front line of delivering public services such as doctors, nurses, store workers, delivery and cleaning staff who all vitally contribute to keeping the community safe.

5) Coordination: This needs to be across and within traditional sectors. Action to date has been littered with contradictory actions and advice between different levels of government. People become uneasy when they cannot rely on a consistent source of information. It leads them to look to social media and rumours to fill the void.

6) Expectations: Provide a sense of future - make clear that plans are being made and what to expect if things get worse or conversely what might be relaxed as things get better. We do this for bushfires and floods already where there are different levels of disaster declarations. However, in dealing with expectations we need to acknowledge the immediate feelings of loss being experienced - from the child missing school and friends to the elderly trapped at home and feeling insecure. Generating hope in these situations becomes an act of leadership as we transition to a new reality.



RSOG: Any messages you would like to share with our alumni, and everyone involved whether directly and indirectly in curbing the COVID-19?

Dr Paul Porteous: A lesson I learnt in responding to mass disasters of cyclones and drought in Africa was that events occur - but whether or not they become a crisis depends on how we react. This is a unique opportunity for individuals in government to have a significant impact on people's lives in a positive way. In the short term, to ensure the provision of basic services of government and the safety of the most vulnerable members of our community. In the longer term, to rebuild trust in our government institutions. People are looking for answers and they are looking for expertise. They still want problems solved and the public service has the knowledge and resources to make a major contribution to making progress. This is a moment when we do not need to just solve a problem, but rather to expand the problem-solving capacity of our communities to respond to emerging challenges as this pandemic continues to unfold.