COVID Corner VIII
Leading Through COVID-19: The *Infodemic*
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This is the eighth in our CHLNet COVID Corner series. Previous issues have underscored effective communications as a <u>sine qua non</u> (i.e., essential piece) of successful leadership at any time, but especially during COVID. As the third wave rolls over most of Canada, we are all seeing how the internet and social media can be used as an essential part of any leader's toolbox for getting good, science-based information out to Canadians in a timely and effective way. That said, the internet can be and is also being used to spread malicious misinformation or 'mal-information'[1]. Everyone is an "instant expert", often cherry-picking data to suit their own beliefs to speak with authority. The danger is it can fuel contrary ideas leading to vaccine hesitancy and to undermining key public health messaging around social distancing, masking indoors and avoiding congregate settings.

Recently, the World Health Organization (WHO) coined the term "Infodemic" to describe this twin challenge of the pandemic, now defined as: "an overabundance of information, both online and offline. It includes deliberate attempts to disseminate wrong information to undermine the public health response and to advance alternative agendas of groups or individuals."[2] Across Canada, governments and public health officials continue to fight this two-front war. What can health leaders do to help identify and debunk misinformation and mal information? What are some of the guideposts for leading through this quagmire of the COVID-19 *Infodemic*? To begin, let's look a little more closely at some of the challenges and opportunities health leaders are facing across Canada today.

Challenges posed by social media can include:

- Determining truth in a previously unexplored context: old research does not necessarily help us in a new frontier.
- Information spin: using correct science to support a point of view for political or personal power.
- Finding a trusted source.
- Diminution of trust of the 'establishment'.
- Shrinking organization's capacity to get 'out in front' when speed and openness of social media has them always playing catch up.
- Using misinformation to create fear and rally people who share that fear to take anti-social action.

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[1] Baines, D. and Elliott, R. (2020) Defining misinformation, disinformation and malinformation: An urgent need for clarity during the COVID-19 infodemic. Link here: https://ideas.repec.org/p/bir/birmec/20-06.html.
[2] World Health Organization (Sept. 2020) "Managing the COVID-19 Infodemic". Link here: https://www.who.int/news/item/23-09-2020-managing-the-covid-19-infodemic-promoting-healthy-behaviours-and-mitigating-the-harm-from-misinformation-and-disinformation.

But the internet can also present opportunities for leading us through to the other side of the pandemic, such as:

- Reaching out directly to individual Canadians and communities through social media.
- Marshalling the full range of social media tools, techniques, and approaches.
- Convening large groups on short notice to listen and to share up-to-date data and information.
- Bringing scientists together more frequently to share information and reach consensus on how to address emergent challenges.
- Enhancing media's insatiable demand for well-researched, accessible advice

Strategic leaders can respond to the challenges of the infodemic, by using the issue of trust as a guide. Without trust, our efforts to shape public action through accurate information will be curtailed.[3] [4] Yet recent surveys on trust indicate that trust in CEOs and in the new media is at an all-time low.[5] Government leaders, CEOs, journalists, and even religious leaders show drops in overall trust scores. This is also a time "…of intense partisanship, when people tend to look to their political leaders to help them decide how to think about issues, including science. This reliance on political leanings can make people susceptible to unscientific arguments."[6]

Canadians are looking for trusted voices. Strategic leaders in mobilizing knowledge during an *infodemic* must do so in keeping with the three characteristics of trust.[7] The first is *benevolence* to others i.e., showing caring, compassion, and consideration for their welfare. The second is to demonstrate *integrity* i.e., adherence to organizational values and evidence as it pertains to the issue at hand. The third is *competence* i.e., can do what is required to do to address a particular issue.

Benevolence in an infodemic is operationalized in several ways. Personally -- by regularly and authentically showing a leader's own caring and compassion in all messaging; while also recognizing one's own biases and ensure individuals or groups are not excluded from consideration. On an interpersonal basis -- a leader listens well and encourages open expressions of information and ideas (i.e., staff on issues of PPE, psychological health, etc.).[8] And lastly, from a strategic perspective -- a leader constantly monitors the needs of diverse groups and the public and can respond quickly through multiple channels and methods. Literature notes that of particular importance is the ability to identify misinformation and disinformation (WHO's seven steps[9]); and then swiftly respond to it

[3] Hartney, E, Dickson, G. Tholl, B et al. (20212 Leading Through the First Wave of COVID: A Canadian Action Research Study; Leadership in Health Services (submitted).
[4] Dickson, G. Tholl, B. et.al. A LEADS Lens on the Pandemic: What Have We Learned? Health Management Forum. 2021 (Submitted). The LEADS framework, in describing conditions for building coalitions—across a region or with communities and the public—states that strategic leaders create connections, *trust* and shared meaning with individuals and groups.
[5] Edelman. Edelman Trust Barometer 2021. Available @ https://www.edelman.com/trust/2021-trust-barometer.
[6] National Geographic (November 2020). 'A Guide to Overcoming COVID-19 Misinformation'. See link here: https://www.psychologicalscience.org/news/a-guide-to-overcoming-covid-19-misinformation.html.
[7] Deljoo A, van Engers T, Gommans L, de Laat C. The impact of competence and benevolence in a computational model of trust. InIFIP International Conference on Trust Management 2018 Jul 9 (pp. 45-57). Springer, Cham.
[8] Reyes DL, Bisbey T, Day D, Salas E. Translating 6 key insights from research on leadership and management in times of crisis. BMJ Leader. 2021 Jun 4: leader-2020.
[9] WHO (2020) Let's Flatten the Infodemic Curve": Link here: https://www.who.int/news-room/spotlight/let-s-flatten-the-infodemic-curve.

to debunk that misinformation and ensure the public's welfare is protected[10] (Caulfield's 9 steps[11]). As Claire Wardle at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, has said, "the best way to fight misinformation is to swamp the landscape with accurate information that is easy to digest, engaging and easy to share on mobile devices."[12]

Integrity in receiving and delivering messages in an infodemic is created by ensuring that strategic communication decisions are aligned with their core values and the ever-evolving evidence. This requires a laser-like focus on the short and long-term objectives amid the COVID crisis, namely saving lives by getting the right information to the right people in a timely way. 'Dithering is dangerous' when it comes to debunking disinformation and mal-information: quick action is required. As the pandemic progresses, we learned the importance of establishing a 'trusted' information center where anyone—staff or public alike—can go for 'wisdom' pertaining to the pandemic. To retain fidelity to the vision and mission of the enterprise, the values of the organization—or in the case of public health, society as a whole—should be reiterated repeatedly. Emotive components of faith, hope and optimism must be clearly transmitted. And we have learned that effective leaders dismantle all unnecessary red tape blocking the ease and quickness of flow of information from the central office to the frontlines.

Competence is the final building block in creating trust. In the early phases, we saw unprecedented cooperation across jurisdictions and across party lines to "flatten the curve" of the COVID epidemic; but recently, there have been instances where fingers of blame have been pointed at others. If collective action is necessary to get us out of the pandemic, we must build the coalitions necessary to do so; competency together with the values of diversity, equity and inclusion are needed to create partnerships that address the needs of diverse groups. Transparency of information is an absolute necessity during an *infodemic*. If there is a perception of hiding fundamental truths, or spinning messages to manipulate, then competence will be questioned, and trust will be eroded. Delivering on deadlines is fundamentally important; but if a deadline must be moved—because of the ever-evolving nature of the pandemic—a clear rationale must be presented. If a leader promises to support an innovation, action in support must follow.

To sum up, many health leaders have added a new word to their day-to-day vocabulary: *epidemiology* or the study of how diseases are transmitted and controlled. Is it time to add another new word: *Infodemiology*?[13] We have learned that health leaders need to be able to use a broad array of skills drawn from the requirements of building trust, and some from the wise practices of mobilizing knowledge if, as the WHO suggests, we are to be successful in "flattening the *infodemic* curve" as an essential part of levelling the COVID curve, globally.

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[10] Teovanović P, Lukić P, Zupan Z, Lazić A, Ninković M, Žeželj I. Irrational beliefs differentially predict adherence to guidelines and pseudoscientific practices during the COVID-19 pandemic. Applied Cognitive Psychology. 2021 Mar;35(2):486-96.

[11] Caulfield T. Pseudoscience and COVID-19 - We've had enough already. Nature. 2020 Apr 27. doi: 10.1038/d41586-020-01266-z. Epub ahead of print. PMID: 32341556

[12] Ibid.

[13] WHO (2020) Let's Flatten the Infodemic Curve": Link here: https://www.who.int/news-room/spotlight/let-s-flatten-the-infodemic-curve.