

A global crisis requires courage

By [Marie Yossava](#), issued by [Grapevine Communications](#)

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As the world faces this extraordinary predicament, never has it been more important for those in the PR and communications industry to remain brave and positive.

PR professionals and communicators need to ensure that they practice not just social distancing, but learn to distance their thoughts and subconscious from the repeat of messages dominating our screens and airwaves, which broadcast fear and anxiety across the globe. This is key if we are to continue communicating with courage, calm and hope.

That doesn't mean to say that professionals can't remain well informed about the situation – to the contrary, it's vital that we do. What we are suggesting, though, is that you guard against this obsession with the virus becoming all-consuming, to the point where we are unable to focus on anything else – a dangerous emotional state, certainly, but one which also inhibits us from fulfilling our role as leaders in communication.

Consider the teams working inside newsrooms around the world right now, battling with long shifts and trying to handle the negativity that sinks into their subconscious along with endless bad news stories. It's not surprising that many are experiencing low morale right now.

In this milieu, we have an important function to fulfil. Like generals in a war, it's our responsibility to rally the troops, lead and provide support with messages of courage, hope and love.

Every piece of communication disseminated to stakeholders must use language, words and expressions that have been carefully selected to create messages that elicit calm, bravery and joy, manifesting empathy for those struggling with the realities of self-isolation. Above all, we must make sure that our communications are non-alarmist.

The fear and panic running rampant through the world are almost tangible right now. There appears to be little focus on finding an antidote in the form of good news stories. Instead, social media feeds are filled with fake news that spread as quickly as the virus itself, fuelling the cycle of anxiety and depression. The problem is that this has a very real impact on people's mental health – an issue that most are already trying to address.

How can we help? Firstly, by practising self-discipline. We cannot look after others if we are not looking after ourselves, so it is crucial to impose a daily structure that mimics that of our 'real lives' as far as possible. Get up at the same time every day, download an exercise routine to get your blood pumping, boost your immunity and create an endorphin fix. At least 15 minutes of meditation or mindfulness will also help to put the pandemic and global crisis into perspective, especially if you choose to focus on gratitude and positive thinking.

Next: shake off the temptation to remain in your pyjamas all day. Dressing as if you were going to the office will create the right mindset – after all, imagine if President Ramaphosa addressed us wearing slippers.

As you sit down at your laptop, pay careful attention to the message you're crafting. Think about the energy your words carry. Every single thing you say has a frequency, vibrating through the universe with an unspoken force that your reader will pick up on. Read and re-read your copy until you are certain that you have conveyed the correct message, and that it will have a positive effect on the reader. Remember that while your job is to relay facts and news, you can do so without overwhelming or triggering fear. This is as important when communicating with colleagues, friends or loved ones as with your clients and their stakeholders.

Our president embodies the skill of conveying information in this manner. As veteran editor Ferial Haffajee has noted, at

every address, he speaks with calmness and authority, always thanking us as a nation for doing the right thing while explaining the reality of the current situation, and ending on a message of hope. Never does he threaten or rant. He is clear, he is present; he is one of us – and, because of this, he commands our respect.

Obviously, we're all human. We can't help but be influenced by what's happening around us – but this is why you should pick your moments for communicating with care. If you're having a low moment, it may be best to wait until you're feeling a little more optimistic before you post online or send an email. Once you're in a better space, you can work once more to beam out hope to others through your words.

It starts with you! Be brave, now more than ever.

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