



After the Phoney War, the Communications Battle Started

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Much like the Phoney War of 1939–1940, when COVID-19 started to blight communities in Northern Italy, many of us went about our business thinking that we could carry on with life as normal. Just over the horizon and in mainland Europe, COVID-19 was already taking lives and creating panic in local communities as people fell ill and many ended up on respirators ventilators in emergency departments. As in the first year of the Second World War, we thought that the risk to our country was much less significant than it actually was. When COVID-19 hit our shores, it silently crept up on us and has, to date, taken over 40,000 lives.

As someone who has worked with faith communities for over 30 years, it was only a matter of time before the effects were felt across the board and in all areas of society and walks of life. As churches and synagogues shut, so did mosques, gurdwaras and temples. Since each faith community has different styles and rituals of worship, there are both shared risks in practising faith and risks that are unique to specific faith communities.

My experience of working on messaging with British Muslims has extended to communities in the UK as well as in countries like Pakistan, where there are strong historical, familial and cultural links to British Muslims in the Midlands, Yorkshire, Greater Manchester and London. The arrival of COVID-19 on our shores has therefore caused substantive changes in how British Muslim communities worship and has directly affected key holy months, such as Ramadan, during which direct engagement with family and relations and daily attendance at the mosque form part of the religious duties undertaken.

My role during this time was to advise colleagues and staff in two organisations that I founded, namely Faith Matters and Tell MAMA, around messaging that needed to be put out to British Muslim communities to ensure their safety. At the core of my organisational leadership within the charities and not-for-profit organisations I have founded and led is the need to ensure that communities feel a part of wider society and to instil a set of beliefs that each action we take is inter-connected and that there are knock-on effects that can create positive or negative social change. Allied to this, I have been a firm believer that the social values of this country, the rule of law, democracy, pluralism, free speech and the right to be heard, should be staunchly defended throughout the work we have undertaken.

This brings me to one of the key tenets of effective leadership which is believing in what you are defending, promoting or ultimately upholding. Some of the most effective leaders have been driven by a set of beliefs and values that they have aligned with outcomes that they were looking to achieve and, in doing so, seeing a clear route and path of action ahead. Effective leadership is also based on another key

principle: ensuring clear and consistent messaging, whether this be to colleagues, military partners or to the multiplicity of teams working on various tasks.

The assumption that many people make is that an effective leader is someone who has innate leadership skills, is bold, fearless and charismatic, and drives change among people through these qualities. The reality is that some of the most successful leaders have not had the full array of these characteristics and skills, but what they have had is the ability to communicate, to bring people with them to achieve an outcome and the capacity to gain the trust of the teams they lead. One of the most successful leaders to do this, and to be fearless and bold, was Alexander the Great, who married into the ruling tribes of the countries that he conquered, knowing that the family that he entered into would communicate his messages in the very forms and mediums that local communities were accustomed to. He had, in effect, married into these tribes to communicate with them and acclimatise himself into their ways of life, irrespective of what the reality was. He was therefore communicating with them and respecting who they were. It is also fair to say that, in doing so, he managed to maintain an army despite the fact that the original Macedonian cohort that he started out with had dwindled through war and disease.

Returning to the challenges presented to me during the pandemic – getting Muslim communities to accept the online messaging and the risks to them by continued association with relatives and coreligionists – meant that the messaging needed to promote the health risks to these communities, whilst binding them into a wider narrative that they had a role to play in ensuring the safety of all people and the wider community. It bound them to others, breaking down perceived barriers around race and culture and thereby reinforcing a message that we truly ‘were in this together’. It also placed them into a role of taking responsibility, which entrusted them with respect and dignity.

Furthermore, the messaging needed to be visually representative, use language that communities could relate to and also play on a sense of social responsibility, something that many British Muslims will relate to, since charitable giving and looking after the more vulnerable and weak in society are fundamental to the belief pattern within Islam. The latter element of supporting the weak and vulnerable in society by shielding, giving food and checking up on senior citizens was further strengthened through the month of Ramadan (May 2020), which is based on ensuring social justice and carrying out good deeds for the wider public.

The online messaging that both Faith Matters and Tell MAMA put out reached over 1.4 million British Muslims in the online space, out of a population of 3 million. This means that at least half saw messaging that we had developed. Over 74% of the online videos we have put out since March 2020 were watched for more than 60 seconds, meaning that our core messaging has been accessed, viewed and digested.

What leadership lessons can we take from these actions and the success we experienced in reaching out to British Muslim communities? First, a clear vision and set of actions, allied to consistent, relevant messaging to the target audience, created the necessary change. Placing that within the bounds of wider shared risks and threats whilst acknowledging the strengths within the target audience meant that we managed to bring many along in the behavioural change required to face the challenges of COVID-19.

Finally, we must not forget that leadership also means having the emotional intelligence to know when to place responsibility with others. Throughout this process, we simply tapped into a strong sense of community responsibility among British Muslims which has always been there. In the end, the change was theirs to make and, by doing so, it opened up their social activism so that wider communities could benefit from it.

This article is taken from the [Leading Through Crisis: Cross Sector Lessons from COVID-19](#) publication produced by the [Centre for Army Leadership](#).