COVID-19: Five essentials for your response plan

In our last paper, Sir Michael Barber offered advice on how governments can organize to tackle this unprecedented crisis - and prepare for the world that emerges after it. In this note, we expand on that advice and focus on one topic: How government leaders should plan for current response and future recovery.

As we write this, the COVID-19 pandemic has not yet reached its global peak. You're in the thick of managing a full-blown crisis - and it may feel like you don't have time or space to think ahead.

But even in the middle of a crisis, planning for delivery is essential. Creating a plan now will help your government move from a reactive to proactive response. Further, every government on the planet will have to manage this challenge for at least the next two years. On that time horizon, the need for a plan becomes even clearer.

So how should a government leader, strapped for time and under pressure, approach planning in a way that makes sense in the current environment?

Here are five things to consider for the person appointed to do the job:

1. Start with outcomes

Every good delivery plan begins with a simple question: "What are you trying to achieve?"

Crisis management is no exception. You can start with the immediate goals that matter most: lowering infection rates, lowering fatality rates for those infected, and protecting economic activity as best you can in the midst of that. Knowing these ultimate goals can help you to set intermediate goals - on testing, contact tracing, improving your system's capacity to handle COVID-19 cases, ensuring continuity of other essential services, providing economic relief, and more. And these intermediate goals should determine the specific actions you prioritize.

Figure 1 lays all of this out. It is our best current understanding - based on our research, dialogue with public health experts, and consultations with government partners around the world - of goals to set, intermediate measures to track, and potential key actions to achieve them. It is, in effect, a skeleton of the delivery plan every government will have to manage, from its center, for at least the next two years. There is a lot here, and different governments will face different constraints or limitations. Local governments in higher-capacity systems will likely be able to get more detailed data. You can start by prioritizing those outcomes and actions that matter most and are feasible in your context.

Over time, the goals and actions in your plan can evolve to include medium- and long-term ones, as you look toward recovery and rebuilding in each sector of government and your economy (more to come on this topic in the future).

Figure 1: Summary of key metrics and actions for a COVID-19 delivery plan

You can find a full detailed version of the metrics and actions here.

Category	Key Actions	Measures to Track	Outcomes
Managing the Disease: These are likely to be important for nearly every government.			
Testing	Ramp up testing capacity	How many tests are completed and positive? How many people are immune?	Infection rate Hospitalization rate Fatality rate
Tracing / Quaran-tine	Deploy contact tracing, guidelines for isolation, and solutions for community quarantine	How fast can we trace and test contacts? How many are infected? How many infected are isolated? How many exposed are quarantined?	
Health system manage-ment	Coordinate deployment of personnel, infrastructure; build temporary hospital and ICU capacity; increase pool of available health care workers	How available are PPE, hospital and ICU beds, ventilators, and health care workers?	
Social distancing	Establish social distancing policies and protocols for applying them over next 2 years; build awareness and monitor compliance	Do community members believe us and change their behavior? How many citations are issued? How do infection rates compare to trajectory?	
Vaccines and treatment	Plan for certification, procurement, and distribution of vaccine before it is available*	How many cases have been treated and how much of the population has been vaccinated?*	
Supporting society: These will vary more by context, but will apply to most governments.			
Funding and resources	Establish funding priorities, maximize funding available, and spend funds quickly and transparently	How much external funding has been secured? How quickly and accurately are funds spent or disbursed, and on what priorities?	Unemployment rate Sales tax revenue Self-reported physical and mental well-being among residents Morbidity/mortality from non COVID-19 causes
Economic relief	Provide support to workers and businesses; facilitate creation of jobs to meet new needs	To what extent are relief benefits being used? How many new jobs are created for COVID-19 response?	
Continuity of services	Move all possible essential services online; support in-person essential workforce	Is there equitable access to essential services? How many essential services are online?	
Physical safety and mental well-being	Increase capacity to improve well-being during sheltering-in place	To what extent are well-being services utilized? How many domestic violence incidents occur and how are they managed?	
Safe and resilient reopening	Establish evidence-based policies and surveillance infrastructure for loosening and tightening social distancing	How many agencies, schools, childcare facilities, and businesses are able to reopen with the right policies and infrastructure in place?	

*If/when these technologies become available

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2. Get the data right

Some of the outcomes you'll want to track will be available; your health system should be able to report on beds, ICU capacity, and ventilators available, for example. Other measures will be entirely new: how many COVID-19 tests are administered each day, and to which types of patients and where? How strong is compliance with social distancing? What has been the uptake of new economic relief benefits? How many schools are distributing meals to families who need them? If ever there was a time to not accept any excuses for lack of good data, this is it. Insist that every metric you care about be reported to you daily.

3. Empower your leaders

If you don't know how - and through whom - each part of your plan will be delivered, the plan is not yet complete. Start by appointing a single accountable leader who reports to you for each part of your plan. For example, think about the actions and measures in Figure 1. Have you appointed a leader with clear ownership over each one? Are you confident that they won't rest until they've delivered that part of the plan?

Each leader needs to be able to articulate three things to you:

- The measurable target they are responsible for
- The delivery chain from them to others in government and out to the front line of service delivery — how implementation will work, the likely challenges, and potential solutions
- Their key actions (each with a deadline) for the next 30 days

Figure 2: Illustrative delivery chain for COVID-19 testing
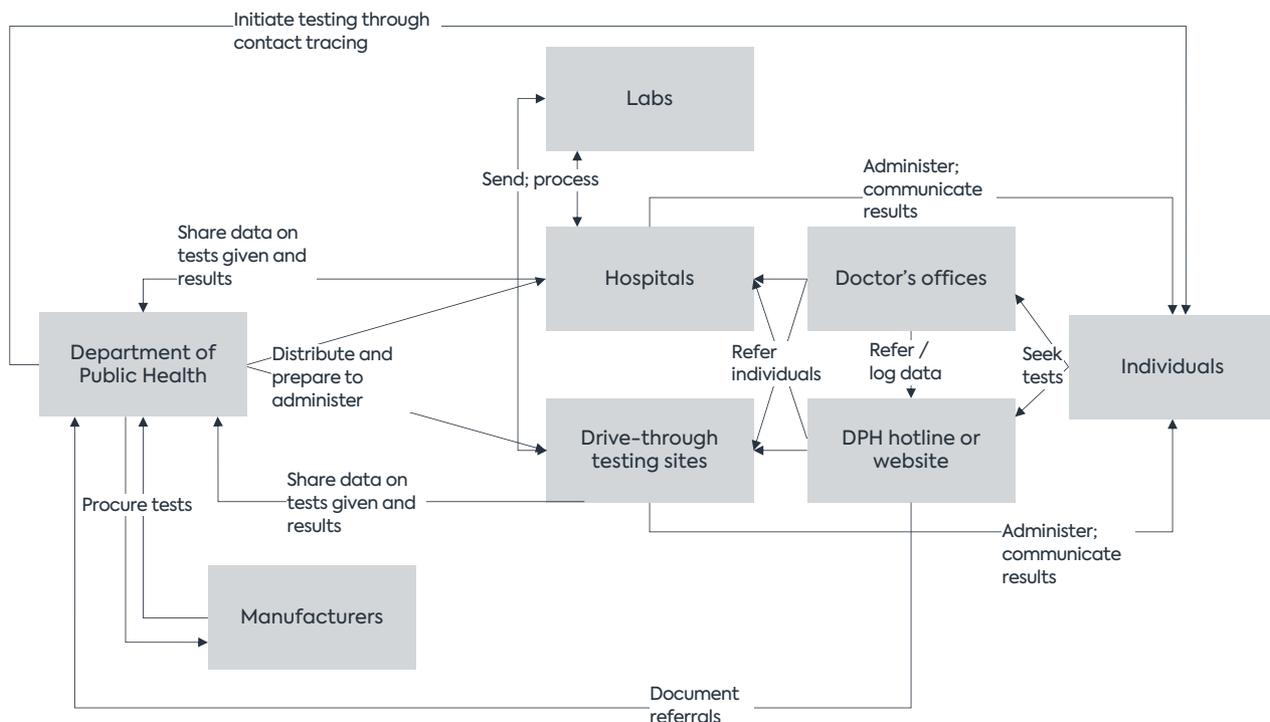
The rest of the details can be up to them. But they need to know that every time they see you, they will find you obsessed with these three things. Which brings us to the fourth thing...

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4. Hold them accountable – consistently and relentlessly

You likely already have crisis management routines set up (and if you don't, this is a good excuse to start immediately). Make sure they are used to hold each designated leader accountable for delivering on their targets on a weekly (if not daily) basis.

You'll know you're succeeding when:

- You're looking at the same data every time (the same charts, graphs, maps, and so on)
- Your conversation focuses on what it will take to move these numbers
- The biggest problems are prioritized for discussion and actions are agreed to address them (with rigorous follow-up in the next meeting)
- (Most importantly) You see evidence of actual progress in the data

Over time, as the situation evolves, these routines can give you feedback that helps you update both the plan and the process for reviewing progress.

If you are able, you may benefit from appointing a delivery leader to help you manage all this. They can set the schedule of reporting, curate the data and information for each routine, provide an objective perspective on progress, and help you to follow up on every action.

5. Communicate (more than you think you have to)

Now more than ever, the public you serve needs to know what's happening and what you're doing to manage the crisis. They will forgive you if you occasionally get things wrong and admit your mistakes; what they won't forgive is hearing from you too late or not at all.

If you focus on the four things above, you will have a lot of data and evidence of progress. How should you share it publicly? How can the information be used both to help confront the reality of the current situation and give a rational basis for hope in the future? What is useful to report on daily and weekly, and in what format? Answer these questions plainly and use them to strengthen the quantity and quality of your communication.

This crisis leaves you with little time to plan. But just a little time - invested in these five things - will significantly improve your response.

Please get in touch at covid19response@deliveryassociates.com.