

## MANAGING ORGANIZATIONS IN A TIME OF CRISIS

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### **Making Sense During a Pandemic: A Novel Virus Can Be A Managerial Hall of Mirrors**

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Author: [Joe Porac](#), George Daly Professor of Leadership, NYU Stern

**Key Takeaways:** New York City's experience with the West Nile Virus in 1999 provides lessons for managers dealing with the current pandemic. Managers should make an effort to communicate beyond their usual network, should keep an open mind and update their beliefs about what is happening frequently, and remember to uphold basic human values such as compassion, fairness, conscientiousness, honesty, integrity, and courage.

The Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard (1843) once famously observed that we must live our lives looking forward but we can only understand our lives looking backward. Managing in the midst of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic makes one doubly appreciative of Kierkegaard's insight. Organizations thrive on routine and the ability to foresee normal contingencies. If novel, unexpected, and life-threatening events interrupt these routines sufficiently, organizations are thrown into what management theorist Karl Weick (1993) has called "cosmology episodes" that generate feelings of *vu jade*, of never having seen something before. *Vu jade* makes it hard to manage and lead because it is not entirely clear what is going on in the situation. Weick introduced the term "sensemaking" to describe the process of "making sense" during crisis events, of asking questions like "What's going on here?" and "What's the story?"

Under conditions of *vu jade*, correct or incorrect interpretations, good or bad decisions, and productive or unproductive courses of action are hard to distinguish in real-time. Because it takes time to make sense of an outbreak, what appears to be a reasonable conclusion one day might seem like just the opposite a few days later, and what appears initially unreasonable may eventually turn out to be the best course of action. Organizations have no choice but to move forward and cope as best they can during *vu jade* episodes. It's only looking backward with the passage of time that a more stable "sense" is made of what happened.

New York City has been hit hard in the recent pandemic, but this is not the only time a novel virus has emerged unexpectedly in the Five Boroughs during the past two decades. West Nile Virus (WNV) emerged for the first time in the Western Hemisphere in Flushing, Queens during the summer of 1999 (e.g., Asnis, Conetta, Waldman, and Teixeira, 2000). That summer, elderly patients in Flushing Hospital died from meningitis and encephalitis, and it was unclear why. Over the course of the next thirty days, public, private, and animal health organizations came together to identify the novel pathogen. As in the early stages of the SARS-CoV-2 outbreak, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control came under fire, this time for prematurely identifying the causal agent as St. Louis Encephalitis Virus (SLEV), a flavivirus that is closely related to WNV. It took two more weeks until a consensus was reached that WNV was the pathogen involved.

We investigated the 1999 outbreak to understand how this sensemaking "breakdown" occurred (Spiro, Porac, Rao and Weick, 2019). The lessons we learned apply to the current crisis as well. A 2000 U.S. Senate report on the West Nile outbreak quoted the eminent virologist Karl Johnson

in suggesting that serological tests trying to distinguish one flavivirus from another were like “looking into a hall of mirrors.” As we dug into the 1999 episode in search of an explanation for the premature SLEV diagnosis, it became clear to us that the term “hall of mirrors” might aptly apply to the organizational side of the outbreak as well.

The U.S. public health system is an extremely complex interorganizational field with many different organizations, each with different resources, responsibilities, and points-of-view. Yet, they must build a “collective sense” and work together to save lives when a novel virus emerges. Research has shown that productive sensemaking during *vu jade* episodes requires both robust information from all corners of the crisis as well as extensive exchange of this information across the parties involved (e.g., Maitlis & Christiansen, 2014). In our study, we constructed an agent-based simulation to model sensemaking during pathogen outbreaks, and we found significant tradeoffs in these two informational requirements. Widespread collection of information and cues from as many sources as possible produced more plausible diagnoses, but it took time to exchange, integrate, and collate the information into a consensual understanding. Of course, time is at a premium when lives are on the line, and in some crisis episodes time runs out and lives are lost. On the other hand, rapid exchange of a more limited array of informational cues sped up consensual understanding, but it also made it more likely that something like a premature SLEV diagnosis would emerge along the way.

### **Implications for Managers**

Given the limits of costs, time, complexity, and human nature itself, this tradeoff is usually lurking in the background during *vu jade* episodes, especially early on. A hall of mirrors of tentative, potentially illusory, understandings will exist until the tradeoff is productively worked through and stable sense is made of the situation. How does one manage in this hall of mirrors?

The first recommendation is to reach out and communicate widely and extensively, even beyond one’s routine network, contacts, and sources. And, if someone reaches out to you, reciprocate in kind. Sensemaking research has shown time and again that subtle, almost imperceptible, early cues that are provided by people and organizations working on the periphery of normal networks are often important pieces of the puzzle. Remember, robust information *and* robust informational exchange are the keys to overcoming *vu jade*.

Second, keep an open mind, imagine a variety of even radical possibilities, and realize that any early interpretation is provisional and probably will need to be updated sooner rather than later. In *vu jade* episodes, interpretations should be considered hypotheses to be tested rather than strong directives to follow. Much sensemaking research has demonstrated the pitfalls of becoming too committed to an early interpretation of what is happening. As well, encourage the voicing of different opinions, and don’t hold it against others when they change their minds in the face of new information. In fact, such updating should be encouraged rather than criticized.

Finally, although *vu jade*’s hall of mirrors means acting on the basis of unstable and shifting interpretations, stability of thought and action in crisis episodes rests in enacting basic human values that apply anywhere and anytime. Others may disagree with one’s interpretations and decisions, and these disagreements might become political fodder, but it is hard to disagree with compassion, fairness, conscientiousness, honesty, integrity, and courage.

## References

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