

Contrasts in Leadership: Cuomo v. Trump

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Leaders are judged based on how they deal with their biggest challenges.

In the COVID-19 crisis we see a contrast of leaders so stark that it can serve as a leadership laboratory for future generations to study.



New York Governor Andrew Cuomo shows a steady, compassionate, and urgent tone as he informs New Yorkers and the broader world about the reality of COVID-19 in his state. His briefings are direct, honest, consistent, and clear. He

sprinkles his commentary with expressions of concern for health workers and hospital patients, he invokes his parents, his brother, and his daughters. And he tells the truth.

President Donald Trump, on the other hand, shows none of these qualities. He bungled the first two months of the pandemic in the U.S. He denied the severity of the virus and downplayed the risk of contagion. He alternates between the rosy – churches full at Easter – and the gloomy – social distancing for much longer. There is still not a whole-of-government response. Rather, there are fragments of a government response. He leaves it to governors to figure out supply chains, even as governors confess that they're bidding against each other – and the federal government – to secure desperately-needed medical equipment.

President Trump heaps praise on himself and expects others to do as well. He recently bragged during a COVID-19 press briefing that he was the most popular person on Facebook.

Governor Cuomo, who, according to [Politico](#), has a “long-standing revulsion to social media,” has nevertheless “rapidly emerged as an internet star.” (Earlier this week, [#Cuomosexual](#) was trending on Twitter.)

President Trump contradicts his own public health experts, who then have to clean up the mess in his absence. He improvises on the existence of testing equipment, medical equipment, and miracle drugs that don't exist. He violates every principle of effective leadership in a crisis.

Winston Churchill admonished, “You must look at the facts because the facts look at you.” President Trump ignores the facts in front of him and invents new ones.

Trump insists on calling COVID-19 the “China Virus” or “Chinese Virus” even though the World Health Organization advises against naming diseases for a particular location because of the stigma involved. And last week the FBI warned

about a wave of hate crimes against Asians and Asian-Americans in this country.

Since the pandemic started my team and I have been studying the best and worst practices in communicating in a COVID-19 world. The best include:

1. **Begin all communication, whether written or verbal, with a statement of values:** Don't dive directly into the facts. Create an emotional connection.
2. **Show you care.** Calibrate communication with empathy.
3. **Be direct, no euphemism:** It's confusing and causes unnecessary stress.
4. **Tell the truth, the whole truth:** Your stakeholders are in this for the long term.
5. **Address all relevant dimensions of the crisis:** A narrow lens is inadequate.
6. **Remember that expectations are dynamic.** Calibrate current expectations.
7. **Communicate through multiple levels and channels.** Be consistent.
8. **Align on values:** Provide detail appropriate to each level and circumstance.
9. **Convey a positive attitude:** Convey urgency short of provoking panic.
10. **Express emotion, vulnerability, and humility.** Effective leaders do.

Governor Cuomo scores on all elements of this scorecard. The President, sadly, misses the mark. Other [leaders](#) can learn from both.



About the Author: For nearly 40 years Helio Fred Garcia has helped leaders build trust, inspire loyalty, and lead effectively. He is a coach, counselor, teacher, writer, and speaker whose clients include some of the largest and best-known companies and organizations in the world.

Fred is president of the crisis management firm Logos Consulting Group and executive director of the Logos Institute for Crisis Management & Executive Leadership. He is based in New York and has worked with clients in dozens of countries on six continents.

Fred has been on the New York University faculty since 1988. He is an adjunct professor of management in NYU's Stern School of Business [Executive MBA program](#), where he teaches crisis management, and where he was named Executive MBA Great Professor. He is an adjunct associate professor of management and communication in NYU's School of Professional Studies, [MS in Public Relations and Corporate Communication](#) program, where he twice received the Dean's award for teaching excellence, in 1990 and in 2017. He also received awards for outstanding service and for 30 years service in teaching. In that program he teaches courses in communication strategy; in communication ethics, law, and regulation; and in crisis communication.

Fred is an adjunct associate professor of professional development and leadership at Columbia University, where he teaches ethics, crisis, and leadership in the Professional Development and Leadership program of the Fu Foundation School of Engineering and Applied Science. Fred is also a Senior Fellow in the Institute of Corporate Communication at Communication University of China in Beijing.

He is the author of five books on leadership, communication, ethics, and trust, including the forthcoming [Words on Fire: The Power of Incendiary Rhetoric and How to Confront It](#).