

LEAVING LOCKDOWN

3 LESSONS DOWNING STREET HAS LEARNT DURING THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

As the COVID-19 emergency continues, the question haunting Cabinet Ministers is: how does Britain get out of lockdown? FTI Consulting considers the three big lessons Downing Street has learnt as it battles the coronavirus outbreak – and how its experience so far will shape its handling of what may prove to be the defining issue of this crisis: when and how to lift restrictions.

Downing Street is grappling with demands for protective equipment, pressures in the care system, a virus that has not yet peaked and a death rate which currently looks on course to be one of the worst in Europe. But the history books may yet see the current lockdown as the easy part. The Government has had to grow up fast in this crisis and has learnt important lessons on the way as it faces the next, more difficult phase of the COVID-19 pandemic.

“We can turn the tide within the next 12 weeks and I’m absolutely confident that we can send coronavirus packing in this country.”

- PM Boris Johnson, 19 March 2020

Lesson One: Reality Doesn’t Bite

On 15 February 2020, Boris Johnson held the first meeting of his new-look Cabinet. Seated beside the new Chancellor Rishi Sunak, he turned to his senior team and asked the question no one had quite been ready for:

“How many hospitals are we going to build?”

After a brief hesitation, his Cabinet chorused “44!”.

He followed up: “And how many more police officers?”

“20,000!”, cried his Ministers.

This one-minute exchange confirmed what Westminster-watchers already knew: Boris Johnson as Prime Minister would inject levity, optimism and energy into governing – and would expect others to follow suit.

If only governing were always that easy. In political campaigning, optimism wins elections. But the British

history books are littered with optimistic party leaders who have made for less successful Prime Ministers.

Pessimists are usually more realistic. And in this crisis, the Government has had to rapidly learn the power of realism.

The lockdown announced by the Prime Minister on March 23rd was the most far-reaching curb on personal freedom ever introduced in the UK in peacetime. The PM announced these restrictions with deep reluctance and promised Britain could “turn the tide within the next 12 weeks.”

This promise created a ticking clock. Although the Government’s own published strategy suggested the science was far from clear on this point, the media discussion focused on *when* we might see a relaxation of restrictions, rather than *how* or *why*.

This story lends itself perfectly to newspaper column inches: will it end in May, or June? Are there Cabinet splits over when it should end?

These questions are important, but unhelpful. The Government has realised its error and is now staying firmly away from optimistic deadlines on the end to lockdown.

They have instead focused on helping the public to understand which factors are important in bringing the lockdown to an end. This reassures people that the restrictions will not last indefinitely, whilst being realistic about what the Government knows at this stage.

Lesson Two: Throw Out The Rule Book

Many Westminster watchers assume that the Government is all-powerful: puppet masters with a god-like reach over and into our lives. But the reality of government is profoundly different.

Ministers build up pictures of policies and problems facing their department through a half-baked hotchpotch of briefings from civil servants, snatched departmental visits on Thursday mornings and stories from people on the ground. Given the difficulty in building up an accurate picture of any given situation, Ministers are often reluctant to make radical policy pronouncements.

Therefore, it is of no surprise to Whitehall insiders that early records of the crisis suggest that the Government's scientific advisors did not propose a lockdown of the kind adopted early on in China here in Britain. In fact, some reports suggest it was not even considered.

The Government accelerated its timeline for a full lockdown when it became both clear that much of the population was already practicing more stringent social distancing than was asked of them, and that spread of the virus was advancing at a more rapid pace than initially thought. At key moments in March, Ministers appeared to be following public opinion, rather than leading it. In time, we will know whether or not this was a grave error.

But one thing we know for sure is that the public continues to be deeply worried about COVID-19, and that they have proven themselves to be largely committed to restrictions on their movement and behaviour. As Ministers consider how to end lockdown, this should allow them to think outside the box about what it can ask of the population to safeguard lives, society and economic prosperity.

Lesson Three: Acknowledge Tough Choices

"When the facts change, sir, I change my mind. And you?"

- John Maynard Keynes

The above quote is often attributed to the economist Keynes – but in fact many believe Keynes remarked: "when my information changes, I alter my conclusions."



EXPERTS WITH IMPACT™

About FTI Consulting

FTI Consulting is an independent global business advisory firm dedicated to helping organisations manage change, mitigate risk and resolve disputes: financial, legal, operational, political & regulatory, reputational and transactional. FTI Consulting professionals, located in all major business centres throughout the world, work closely with clients to anticipate, illuminate and overcome complex business challenges and opportunities.

The views expressed in this article are those of the author(s) and not necessarily the views of FTI Consulting, its management, its subsidiaries, its affiliates, or its other professionals.

www.fticonsulting.com

In this current crisis, as governments around the world grapple with what they do not understand, being honest about new information is vital to maintaining public confidence.

The Government has had to improve its public communication considerably through the crisis, explaining the evidence underpinning its decisions as well as providing updated statistics on the virus' spread. This crucial step, combined with the move to daily briefings, has been important in maintaining public support.

We saw this in March when the new analyses from the Government's scientific advisers was published to better explain the rapid escalation of Britain's lockdown.

As the Government puts together its strategy to end the lockdown, it should remember this lesson. Uncertainty is fine. Indeed, it is inevitable. The key is to be honest about both what it knows and what it doesn't, even while other European countries ease restrictions.

These are tough political choices, with no easy answers. How should the Government manage deaths from COVID-19 alongside strains on the healthcare system dealing with other illnesses? What could happen if forecasts from the Office of Budget Responsibility worsen further? It helps for some of the options for next steps to be debated openly, to maintain public support for the current restrictions domestically as other countries take a different approach.

What next?

The COVID-19 emergency has had an extraordinary reach into every aspect of British life. Social norms, the structure of our economy and our relationship to the state are all in flux. Government has had to answer questions it didn't know to ask and the learning curve for the past 60 days has been as steep as it is perilous.

Since the crisis began, the Government has learnt lessons along the way – eschewing optimism for realism, opening itself up to more interventionist approaches, and sharing much more with the public about the tough choices it faces.

Trying to predict what will happen next is a fool's errand, particularly as Britain is currently ranked amongst the worst-hit countries anywhere in the world. But the lessons Downing Street has learnt and already put into practice during this emergency shows it is a Government learning fast as it battles against a deadly enemy.

Anita Boateng is a Senior Director in FTI Consulting's Public Affairs team. Before joining FTI she worked as a special adviser to the defacto Deputy Prime Minister Sir David Lidington in the Cabinet Office.

Anita.boateng@fticonsulting.com +44 (0) 203 3195703

©2020 FTI Consulting, Inc. All rights reserved.