



What are we learning about crisis management from the COVID-19 experience? One important lesson is that, despite our best-laid plans, often we must just muddle through (also known as “innovate”, but innovation is usually what we call it afterwards, when it has worked out; muddling through is how it feels as we’re doing it). We created a Strategic National Stockpile, an admirable plan, but where thousands of supplies were desperately needed, only hundreds could be shipped, many ventilators were broken or missing parts and masks and surgical gowns were rotted, moldy and unusable. Hospitals in New York City did not have nearly the number of needed beds. So, they muddled through. Hospitals set up tents and trailers in their parking lots. They split ventilators, experimented with sanitizing masks and tried disposable paper gowns.

Muddling-through is virtually inevitable in every crisis. It is not that planning is unimportant, but that it is not predictive. “Every time we get hit, it is always something we didn’t expect,” Dr. Anthony S. Fauci, Director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases. As Dwight Eisenhower famously said, “In preparing for battle, I have always found that plans are useless, but planning is indispensable.” With anticipated resources marshaled in a well-prepared, up-to-date notebook and with frequently rehearsed protocols and procedures, you can muddle through a crisis with greater confidence of getting through with less muddle. Your team always stands a better chance of winning if, when it takes the field, it is already fit, well-practiced and knows some plays. But even with a playbook, you will not know what pitch to expect next. A crisis is not T-ball.

Muddling-through requires creativity, versatility, resilience and always calm confidence. At the height of the financial crisis, Lloyd Blankfein, then CEO of Goldman Sachs, rode the short distance from Goldman’s office to the New York Fed accompanied by a few of his most senior officers. At some point during the ride, one of the beleaguered executives moaned that he did not know if he could hold up under the intense pressure. Blankfein fixed him with a look and said this: “You’re riding in a Mercedes limousine to the New York Fed; not in a Higgins boat to Omaha Beach.” That is leadership muddling through.

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