

ARTICLE

COMMUNICATING IN A PANDEMIC: NEW YORK GOVERNOR ANDREW CUOMO'S KEYS TO SUCCESS

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THE 10 KEYS TO GOVERNOR ANDREW CUOMO'S SUCCESS

In New York, the epicenter of the pandemic in the United States, a charismatic leader has emerged. He was well-known before now, but he has demonstrated a prodigious ability to manage communications during the coronavirus crisis. His name is Governor Andrew Cuomo, and he is 62 years old. A member of the Democratic party and a lawyer by trade, Cuomo has had a long career working in U.S. public administrations, having served in Clinton's government and as the [governor of New York State](#) for more than 10 years.

What are the keys to his success in communicating?

1. COMPLEX THINKING, SIMPLE COMMUNICATIONS

Governor Cuomo is rigorous with his data, but he uses the language of the street. He talks about his mother as part of one of the vulnerable groups, sharing his intimate family conversations and his concerns.

Cuomo even shared how his sister had called him in a panic, wanting a COVID-19 test at a time when there were almost none in New York (in Spain, they could be accused of influence peddling). He told her to be calm, stay at home and not to do anything if she didn't have more serious complications. He always looks for practical examples and human stories to help him reach people.

Cuomo accompanies his news conferences with PowerPoint presentations sharing clear, direct and very concise messages such as, "Younger people are not that contagious. This is absolutely untrue! And it endangers our most vulnerable people." His institutional slogan, present on all slides, is "Stay home. Stop the spread. Save Lives."

2. SINCERITY

Governor Cuomo does not lie. He is up-front about the exponential growth, fact that New York could be the epicenter of the United States and the reality that the hospital system could collapse. He shares the bad news (deaths infections, etc.) without fear. Just last weekend, he got angry with New Yorkers who went out to parks, threatening to take more drastic action if it happened again. But it was more akin to the rebuke of a parent who appreciates and protects you than a Donald Trump-style rebuke toward certain journalists. Cuomo speaks not just to the head, but also the heart. He communicates with soul.



3. EMPATHY AND SPIRITUALITY

From day one, Governor Cuomo used rhetorical questions as a communications technique. He has said things like, "Am I afraid during this time? Yes. Do we know how long it will last? No. Of course I don't have an answer to this. But together, we'll keep moving forward. We New Yorkers are strong. We're fighters, and we'll keep moving forward." He calls on people to show solidarity as a basic value of New York society.

He is also the first politician talking about what people should be doing at home during the quarantine, suggesting they read, meditate, do physical exercise, etc. He urged people to "Talk to your loved ones, and tell them how much you love them. We will get through this, as we have other difficult situations." He does not talk about religion or any god, but about community values and principles.

4. MAKING HEADLINES

His long career in politics and vast amount of public exposure have prepared him to deliver strong messages that journalists echo quickly. For example, "The difference between having enough ventilators and not having enough ventilators is the same as the difference between life and death."

5. SOCIAL MEDIA

Cuomo's communications team is agile and effective. Each time they post something, it announces something specific or includes an informative headline: Available aid, restrictions, etc. His social media has become an official channel with 100 percent reliable, up-to-date information.

His principle social platform is [Twitter](#), where he has more than 1 million followers. His content here is very well organized, with clear, well-structured messages targeting society at large. It is his main weapon of choice for communicating, and he has a high level of per-tweet engagement. Here, he calls for more doctors and nurses, or even medical interns, to join the fight, or asks the private sector for help getting more ventilators. Cuomo takes a multidisciplinary approach,

acting as both activist and the voice for official decisions.

Surprisingly, his Instagram is much less active. He posts more tweets, but this network is targeting his younger audience. He has addressed them directly several times because of their responsibility in the spread of the disease.

6. PARTNERSHIPS WITH SOCIAL STAKEHOLDERS

Governor Cuomo has not hesitated to personally call actors and famous New Yorkers one-by-one to ask them for help in encouraging people to stay at home. Personalities such as Robert De Niro, Danny DeVito, Ben Stiller, Alec Baldwin, Krystal Joy Brown and more have had a tremendous impact. Cuomo has been able to capitalize on their help, and his work with them has conveyed a sense of leadership and influence. It is an American-style campaign in the purest sense, with for a noble cause.

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7. A PICTURE IS WORTH 1,000 WORDS

Cuomo knew he had to leave the typical newsroom to take his communications to the next level. He has already had his picture taken with a respirator, and this past Tuesday, he shared an image of himself at the Javits Center, Manhattan's largest provisional hospital. His surroundings in the photo also communicate and lend credibility to his message. He is conscious of every detail, such as having boxes of masks and medical supplies, delivered to help patients, in the background of his photo at the Javits Center.

Cuomo also made a summary video that looks more like part of a reelection campaign than a crisis management effort, but it shows his deep knowledge of the art of communication. It is a motivational video that shares objective data to spur New York patriotism at the highest level, in pure American style.

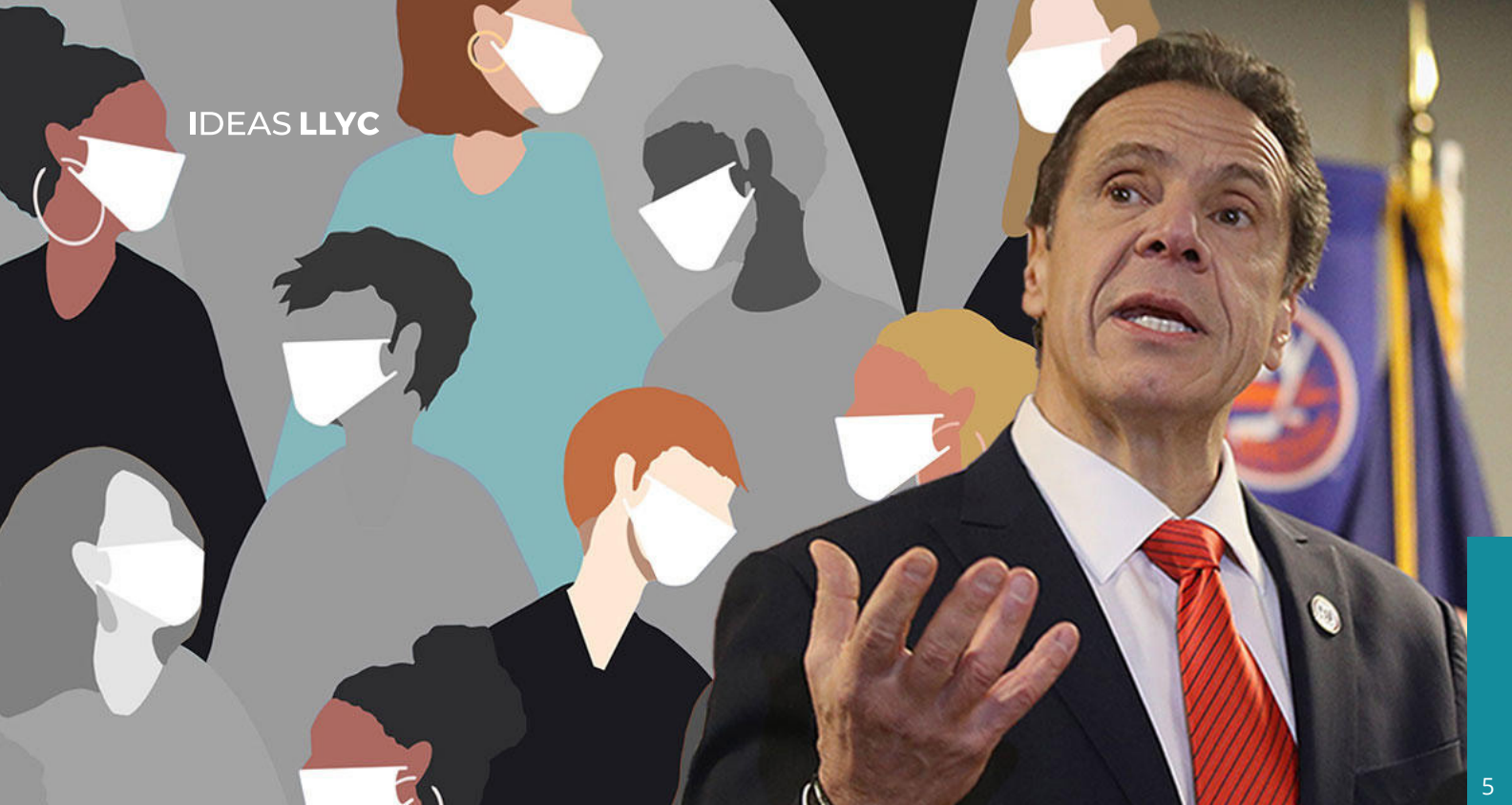
8. LEADERSHIP

He speaks like a leader and he offers solutions. He acknowledges limitations, but states what needs to be done. For example, "We need more than 30,000 respirators in 14 days or we'll have many deaths that we can avoid." He stands up and takes all questions without hesitation. 10.

9. SPEED AND PROACTIVITY

His public exposure, at all levels, is constant. It takes him less than a minute to tell President Trump that the lives of New Yorkers come before the economy. Governor Cuomo is demonstrating an understanding of the power of good communications in a crisis, and how difficult times can create space for those who care to showcase their leadership to the country's citizens.

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10. BODY LANGUAGE

Numerous studies have shown that body language and nonverbal communication delivers more than 70 percent of the message. Governor Cuomo communicates calm, strength and security. With his steady gaze and powerful voice, he does not hesitate at any time. His relaxed gestures are well aligned with the messages he seeks to convey, and the touches of humor he includes create a relaxed atmosphere in the newsroom – something helped by how he empathizes with the journalists at every news conference he holds. A master of intonation, he always conveys his mood, whether it be outrage at the lack of resources or coordination from the Trump administration, his paternalistic feeling toward New Yorkers or his disapproval of those who do not stay at home, but instead go out in Central Park.

In a very short period of time, Cuomo has become a key character in the U.S. COVID-19 crisis. He is a good example to follow for both professional communicators and politicians who think they can still learn and improve (if there are any!). The good (and sad) thing is, Cuomo will likely continue giving us lessons for a while. From the communication perspective, however, his actions are worth analyzing. Let's take a deeper look at what he does - from home. #IStayHome

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AUTHORS



Alejandro Romero. Partner and CEO for the Americas at LLYC. Ever since 1997 Romero has been at the forefront of the company's expansion processes in Latin America, starting operations in Peru, Argentina, Colombia, Panama, Ecuador, Mexico and recently, Miami. Romero has also recently led the communication processes in three of the ten most important M&A operations in the region: the selling of BellSouth operations to the Telefonica Group; SABMiller's acquisition of the Corporate Group Bavaria and; the selling of the Financial Group Uno to Citibank. In 20 years, Romero has managed to position LLYC as the leading communication network in Latin America.



Gerard Guiu. Director of International Business Development. Gerard Guiu is a lawyer and journalist, Master in International Law by ESADE – Ramón Llull and Master in Journalism from the Univ. Of Barcelona and Columbia University. He has also conducted studies on International Relations at the Faculty of Law of Tulane University in New Orleans, Louisiana, and at the University of Westminster in London.as He has developed his professional career as the Chief of the Presidential cabinet of the soccer club FC Barcelona, the Health secretary of Catalonia, in the Mayor's office of Lleida and of the Rector of Ramon Llull University. For 15 years, he has carried out academic activities at ESADE, teaching oratory and professional communication. Currently, he is the director of International Business Development of LLYC in New York City where he has been living for 5 years.

MANAGEMENT TEAM

José Antonio Llorente
Founding Partner and Chairman
jallorente@llorenteycuenca.com

Alejandro Romero
Partner and CEO Americas
aromero@llorenteycuenca.com

Enrique González
Partner and CFO
egonzalez@llorenteycuenca.com

Adolfo Corujo
Partner and Chief Strategy and
Innovation Officer
acorujo@llorenteycuenca.com

Nazaret Izquierdo
Chief Talent Officer
nizquierdo@llorenteycuenca.com

Cristina Ysasi-Ysasmendi
Corporate Director
cysasi@llorenteycuenca.com

Juan Pablo Ocaña
Director, Legal & Compliance
jpocana@llorenteycuenca.com

Daniel Fernández Trejo
Director, Technology
dfernandez@llorenteycuenca.com

José Luis Di Girolamo
Partner and Global Controller
jldigirolamo@llorenteycuenca.com

Antonietta Mendoza de López
Vice President, Advocacy LatAm
amendozalopez@llorenteycuenca.com

SPAIN AND PORTUGAL

Arturo Pinedo
Partner and Managing Director
apinedo@llorenteycuenca.com

Luisa García
Partner and Managing Director
lgarcia@llorenteycuenca.com

Barcelona

María Cura
Partner and Managing Director
mcura@llorenteycuenca.com

Óscar Iniesta
Partner and Senior Director
oiniesta@llorenteycuenca.com

Muntaner, 240-242, 1º-1ª
08021 Barcelona
Tel. +34 93 217 22 17

Madrid

Joan Navarro
Partner and Vicepresident,
Public Affairs
jnavarro@llorenteycuenca.com

Amalio Moratalla
Partner and Senior Director,
Sport and Business Strategy
amoratalla@llorenteycuenca.com

Iván Pino
Partner and Senior Director,
Digital
ipino@llorenteycuenca.com

David G. Natal
Partner and Senior Director,
Consumer Engagement
dgonzalez@llorenteycuenca.com

Ana Folgueira
Partner and Executive Manager
of the Creative Studio
afolgueira@llorenteycuenca.com

Paco Hevia
Senior Director,
Corporate Communication
phevia@llorenteycuenca.com

Jorge López Zafra
Senior Director,
Financial Communication
jlopez@llorenteycuenca.com

Lagasca, 88 - planta 3
28001 Madrid
Tel. +34 91 563 77 22

Lisbon

Tiago Vidal
Partner and Managing Director
tvidal@llorenteycuenca.com

Avenida da Liberdade nº225, 5º Esq.
1250-142 Lisboa
Tel. + 351 21 923 97 00

UNITED STATES

Erich de la Fuente
Partner and Chairman
edelafuente@llorenteycuenca.com

Carlos Correcha-Price
CEO
ccorrecha@llorenteycuenca.com

Miami

Emigdio Rojas
Executive Director
erojas@llorenteycuenca.com

Claudia Gioia
SVP Americas,
Business Development
cgioia@llorenteycuenca.com

600 Brickell Avenue
Suite 2020
Miami, FL 33131
Tel. +1 786 590 1000

New York City

Gerard Guiu
Director, International Business
Development
gguiu@llorenteycuenca.com

3 Columbus Circle
9th Floor
New York, NY 10019
United States
Tel. +1 646 805 2000

NORTH REGION

Javier Rosado
Partner and Regional Managing
Director
jrosado@llorenteycuenca.com

Mexico City

Juan Arteaga
Managing Director
jarteaga@llorenteycuenca.com

Rogelio Blanco
Managing Director
rblanco@llorenteycuenca.com

Av. Paseo de la Reforma 412
Piso 14, Colonia Juárez
Alcaldía Cuauhtémoc
CP 06600, Ciudad de México
Tel. +52 55 5257 1084

Panama City

Manuel Domínguez
Managing Director
mdominguez@llorenteycuenca.com

Sortis Business Tower
Piso 9, Calle 57
Obarrio - Panamá
Tel. +507 206 5200

Santo Domingo

Iban Campo
Managing Director
icampo@llorenteycuenca.com

Av. Abraham Lincoln 1069
Torre Ejecutiva Sonora, planta 7
Suite 702
Tel. +1 809 6161975

San Jose

Pablo Duncan - Linch
Partner and Director
CLC Comunicación | Afiliada LLYC
pduncan@clcgloba1.cr

Del Banco General 350 metros oeste
Trijos Montealegre, Escazú
San José
Tel. +506 228 93240

ANDEAN REGION

Luis Miguel Peña
Partner and Regional Managing
Director
lmpena@llorenteycuenca.com

Bogota

María Esteve
Partner and Managing Director
mesteve@llorenteycuenca.com

Av. Calle 82 # 9-65 Piso 4
Bogotá D.C. - Colombia
Tel. +57 1 7438000

Lima

Gonzalo Carranza
Managing Director
gcarranza@llorenteycuenca.com

Av. Andrés Reyes 420, piso 7
San Isidro
Tel. +51 1 2229491

Quito

Carlos Llanos
Managing Director
cllanos@llorenteycuenca.com

Avda. 12 de Octubre N24-528 y
Cordero - Edificio World Trade
Center - Torre B - piso 11
Tel. +593 2 2565820

SOUTH REGION

Juan Carlos Gozzer
Partner and Regional Managing
Director
jcgozzer@llorenteycuenca.com

Sao Paulo

Cleber Martins
Partner and Managing Director
clebermartins@llorenteycuenca.com

Rua Oscar Freire, 379, Cj 111
Cerqueira César SP - 01426-001
Tel. +55 11 3060 3390

Rio de Janeiro

Daniele Lua
Executive Director
dlua@llorenteycuenca.com

Ladeira da Glória, 26
Estúdios 244 e 246 - Glória
Rio de Janeiro - RJ
Tel. +55 21 3797 6400

Buenos Aires

Mariano Vila
Partner and Managing Director
mvila@llorenteycuenca.com

Av. Corrientes 222, piso 8
C1043AAP
Tel. +54 11 5556 0700

Santiago de Chile

Marcos Sepúlveda
Managing Director
msepulveda@llorenteycuenca.com

Francisco Aylwin
Chairman
faylwin@llorenteycuenca.com

Magdalena 140, Oficina 1801
Las Condes
Tel. +56 22 207 32 00



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