

# A former European defense chief offers leadership lessons for tackling coronavirus

The former chief of defense of the Netherlands armed forces, Tom Middendorp, describes his approach to crisis management amid a complex situation like the coronavirus outbreak.



**In this video interview**, Tom Middendorp—the ex-chief of defense of the armed forces of the Netherlands—offers a lens on leading through a crisis such as the coronavirus outbreak.

In addition to highlighting three elements to help leaders build trust, Middendorp answers questions around several topics:

- how to advise organizations dealing with this crisis
- how leaders can communicate in times of crisis
- how leaders can deal with anxiety
- what leaders should not forget amid a crisis

A transcript of his remarks follows.

### **Interview transcript**

**Tom Middendorp:** I've been involved in crisis management for ten years on an almost daily basis. In general, I think it's important that you take charge. This is the moment you as a leader need to be visible. You cannot delegate this to your branches or to your divisions. What you should do in a crisis situation as a leader first is to direct and make sure that you put the right priorities on top and that you give focus to what everybody has to do.

The second thing you have to do is to enable them, to give them the empowerment, to give them the tools to find the solutions. When you direct, you give the what and the why. You tell them what effects you want to achieve and why you want to achieve them. But you also need to empower them and enable them to translate that into the how, into solutions, into very practical things.

But you don't want to micromanage as a leader, because it's impossible to micromanage a crisis. You have to create situational leadership. You have to empower your lower-level leaders to deal with it on their levels.

The third thing you need to do is make sure that you work as a team. You need to work with integrated teams, not in stovepipes, and make sure that you're all on the same sheet of music, working with the same information, and reinforce each other—so that we know from each other who's doing what, but that you also can help each other when somebody is in trouble. And all these three elements help you to build trust, to build trust in your organization, but also to translate that trust to the partners, to your stakeholders outside who can become more confident that you are in charge of things.

### **Johanna Hirscher: What would you advise organizations in dealing with this crisis?**

**Tom Middendorp:** I think you need to organize four things in a crisis situation. First of all, you need to organize your information. You need different types of information, and you need it quickly to base your decisions upon. This is very basic.

The second thing you need to organize is a kind of an operations room, a crisis center where all the information comes together, where you can manage and coordinate all the efforts inside of your company or your organization.

The third thing you need to do is separate the plans, so set apart a bunch of people who look ahead, who look at scenarios, who develop the measures that you need to take, who will prepare your next step—because else everybody gets bogged down into the daily business and into the hectic [nature] of the moment. You don't want that to happen. You want to become more proactive.

And the fourth thing you need to do and need to organize is crisis communication. And crisis communication is different from the normal communication. It's getting everybody involved, and it's about stress reduction. It's about reassuring everybody that you're on top of things and that you're able to deal with it. Crisis communication is where you share your information

and where you explain what you are going to do about it.

**Johanna Hirscher: How do we avoid putting all focus on the urgent?**

**Tom Middendorp:** Well, that's a big challenge for most organizations because we are all working on trying to get a grip on the crisis. So we're all very busy in the moment doing all the things that need to be done. But it's important that you set apart groups of planners who look ahead, who enable you to become more proactive.

What we do in the military is create integrated planning teams. And they look at short-term, mid-term, and long-term solutions, and they develop options. For you as a leader, it's important to direct them in the beginning.

In my experience, what I did as a leader is to be present. At the starting point of any planning process, I gave guidance: so, what effect do I want to achieve, why do I want to achieve it, when do I want this plan to be ready, and other guidance that is needed for their planning to focus them on what needs to be done, that they develop options or measures to be taken. They stress test these options against the worst-case scenario and the most likely scenario. And then they present these options to you. They might even help you develop criteria for your choice.

And that's the second moment where you step in as a leader. You discuss these options with your management team, and you make a decision. OK, we choose this option. And they then translate that into a more detailed operations plan, or whatever you call it, explaining who has to do what. So, what do you expect from the different players in your organization to bring to the table?

And the last thing you do as a leader is communicate this. Make sure that everybody

understands your intentions, what you want to achieve, and when you want to achieve it so that also there in the next step in setting this up that everybody's on the same sheet of music and that you become visible again.

**Johanna Hirscher: How should leaders communicate in times of crisis?**

**Tom Middendorp:** What we see in most evaluations of a crisis is that crisis communication is the biggest shortfall. We often don't communicate enough because often we just communicate where we are certain that something is happening. But you also have to communicate your uncertainty. My key message would be better to communicate too much than too little because if you don't communicate enough, people start making their own assumptions. They start building their own pictures, and these pictures will always be less helpful than if you paint them the real picture.

When you communicate, I think it's crucial in your organization that you kind of build a list of key messages. What do you want to bring across? And these key messages should be distributed to all your leaders, and also to the mid- and lower-level leaders, so that you also make the same noise and talk the same messages. Second, what might be good is in the ops room, you get all kinds of questions, that you gather these questions in Q&As and make a Q&A list. This Q&A list can be used in your communication internally, to make people all aware of the answers, and so that you don't have to reinvent the answers over and over again, but also to help your lower-level leaders to provide answers themselves.

**Johanna Hirscher: Leaders also feel anxiety. How have you dealt with this?**

**Tom Middendorp:** Let me first stress it's very normal to feel that. You're in an extraordinary situation, and you feel the full burden of your responsibility on your shoulders. You see all the eyes are watching you, are

watching how you act. You have to show resolve. But in the meantime, you have to base your decisions on very limited information.

There are a lot of doubts. There are high stakes. I fully understand that. And I also experience that anxiety. It's very normal.

But what could be helpful is that you create reflection around you. That you have a few persons that you can trust, that you can show your feelings, your uncertainties, your emotions with. Just sharing is often enough so that you have somebody that can put a hand on your shoulder and comfort you in a difficult time.

You should not show this in your communication, of course. You need to show resolve. And you don't need to show doubt. But you can be honest that you have to deal with uncertainties and that there is no right or wrong answer here so that we together need to find the right answers. In your communication, you can help people address uncertainties and make them aware that it's very normal to feel uncertain and that we all have to deal with this together.

**Thomas Middendorp** is a retired general of the Royal Netherlands Army and served as chief of defense of the armed forces of the Netherlands from 2012 to 2017.

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### **Johanna Hirscher: What should we not forget in the middle of a crisis?**

**Tom Middendorp:** Well, don't forget that you're not alone in this. It's not you feeling the uncertainty. It's not just you feeling that pressure. It's everybody around you. We are all feeling this, so you're not alone in this battle. We are in this together, and we need to resolve this together.

Second, I think humor can be helpful. Soldiers deal with it all the time. If there's a lot of stress, sometimes a good joke or a bit of humor can help people relax for a moment without making a joke of the situation you're in. Just to keep the stress away sometimes is good.

But most of all, I would say keep focus at the three elements that I mentioned, which is provide guidance, make sure that everybody's focused in the same direction, and enable the people so that they can help you resolve the problems and translate your guidance into solutions and work as a team. Keep on connecting your people, and make sure it's a team effort.

