

The response to the COVID-19 pandemic has driven home some lessons about governance. Those lessons have broader application — for instance, to climate governance. We can't afford for the federal government to flunk Crisis Management 101 again.

Here are five key lessons:

**1. Effective leadership from the top is indispensable.** Major problems require action by multiple federal agencies. These agencies need help coordinating; they may also need to be pushed into changing priorities and revamping procedures to deal with a major new issue. This is going to be very much true of climate policy. The trick is to provide leadership without hampering front-line agencies.

**2. Agency expertise is also indispensable.** We've seen how decision making in the White House has too often ignored the expertise of public health experts. The result is bad policy. Trump is extreme in this respect, but the White House 's in-house expertise can never compare with the rest of the government. So caution about centralized decision making is necessary.

**3. Information needs to be accessible and trustworthy.** Dr. Fauci has come to represent a clear, honest source of crucial technical information. Without the ability to trust in such information, the public won't buy into policies. Experts often underestimate the need for public communication or lack the necessary skills.

**4. State governments are crucial participants.** In the settings of coronavirus and climate change, states took the initiative early on. They also provide a backstop against governance failure at the federal level. Finally, they have a local presence that is indispensable for changing behavior and making context-specific decisions.

**5. Even during seemingly quiet times, risk-management institutions are vital.** The Trump Administration downplayed the need for such institutions and for the kind of monitoring and contingency planning that they engage in. This was the "Fifth Risk" that Michael Lewis wrote about in his [book](#): the risk that the institutions that guard against catastrophe will be chipped away. The fact that you haven't had a fire in a long time is a really bad reason to cut repair expenses for the fire alarm and sprinklers.

I know none of this seems like rocket science. It's pretty easy stuff to understand. It's not always quite so easy to implement it. We've all recently gotten a crash course in what happens when you get it wrong.