

Handbook for Post-Covid Communication

A comic book for
executives.



Written and illustrated
by **Fiona Passantino**



This book is for...



the account
manager



the
copywriter



the
student



the sales
team lead



the crisis
communicator



the HR
partner



the
inventor



the
fundraiser



the
CEO



the
teacher



the
start-up



the
upstart



the restaurant
owner going full
social, takeout



the
CFO



the data
analyst



the press
officer

...everyone with a story to tell.

"An unexpected page-turner! Entertaining, informative and inspiring at the same time. Just when you think you have read too much Corona-content you come across this book. I totally recommend it."

- Tim Cupal Correspondent ORF Austrian Broadcasting Corporation

"Absolutely fantastic... a seriously funny companion for post-covid leaders - i.e. Chief Storytelling Officers."

*- Hüseyin Güngör, PhD
AI professor University of Amsterdam*

"A riveting story on our rapidly changing world and the ways in which (corporate) communication needs to follow suit in order to remain effective."

- Edgar Weiffenbach, Head of Strategy Development, PostNL

"Insightful and inspiring. The drawings are catching and I think that it will be most useful to a wide range of communicators. It doesn't provide simplistic 'recipes' but ideas, food for thought, and inspiration."

*- Maria Teresa Brancaccio
MTB, PhD, Assistant professor,
Maastricht University*

"Thought provoking, knowledgeable, analytical, and profoundly human, this is a must-read for any corporate wanting to get their message through Post Covid-19, be it to their clients or within the organization. I devoured it. Realistic, down to earth, she paints the picture of a new world where maybe indeed pandemics are endemic, but where the corporate scene is more human, more diverse, with merged boundaries in a flexible working environment with people and human values at their heart and, a shorter, more effective style of communication under the aegis of the CSO – the Chief Storyteller.

There is no going back - read it!"

*- Julie Kennedy, communication specialist,
coach, editor and podcast host*

"In one sitting, I flipped, stopped, watched, read, and deeply understood the ideas and techniques in the book."

*- Bradley Charbonneau, Author
and motivational speaker*

"Fiona shows that for communication to function cross-border and cross-cultural needs to be simpler, pictorial, and preferably animated to increase non-verbal understanding. Simplified, the narrative decreases feelings of isolation and improves connection within our work environments and communities-at-large."

*- Dr. Anna Farrenkopf
Founder IPLW*

"Funny and wise, imaginative yet full of practical advice, Fiona has delivered a model of communication for business executives that are genuinely interested in connecting with their audience through effective storytelling."

- Dana Chen, Corporate Communication Advisor

"I devoured it. Realistic, down to earth, she paints the picture of a new world where maybe indeed pandemics are endemic, but where the corporate scene is more human, more diverse, with merged boundaries in a flexible working environment with people and human values at their heart and, a shorter, more effective style of communication under the aegis of the CSO – the Chief Storyteller. There is no going back - read it!"

- Julie Kennedy, communication specialist, coach, editor and podcast host

"Future managers take note! We've learned so much from 2020, and Fiona shows the challenges we've overcome."

*- Souhaila, Chocofan Caretaker
Tony's Chocolonely*

"In clear, concise, and largely visual language, this book breaks down the challenges of communicating in a post-COVID, media-rich world and outlines methods of visual storytelling for the first generation of Chief Storytelling Officers. Highly recommended!"

- Josh Scherr, Writer & Narrative Designer, Naughty Dog

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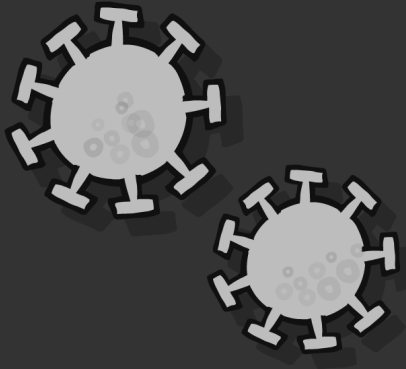
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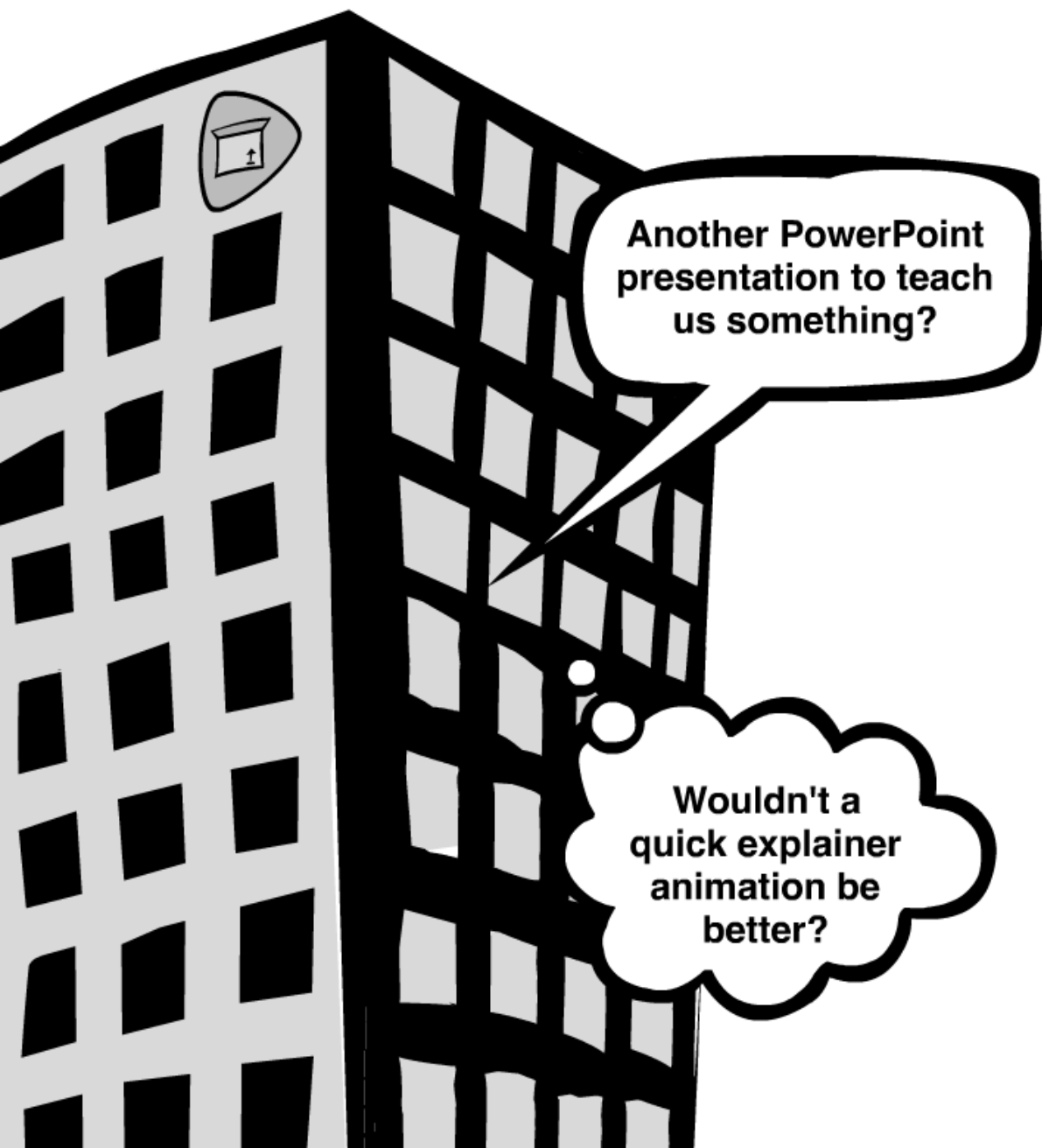


instagram.com/passantino.fiona



PART I: **the experiment**

Thousands of years ago, in a time before the pandemic. January 2020. A training event was underway in the Hague, the Netherlands, at a Dutch postal company headquarters.



**This is
amazingly
boring...**

**I can't
even read
the text!**

**I'll find an
animation on
this subject
later.**



Illegible text block 1

Illegible text block 2

Illegible text block 3

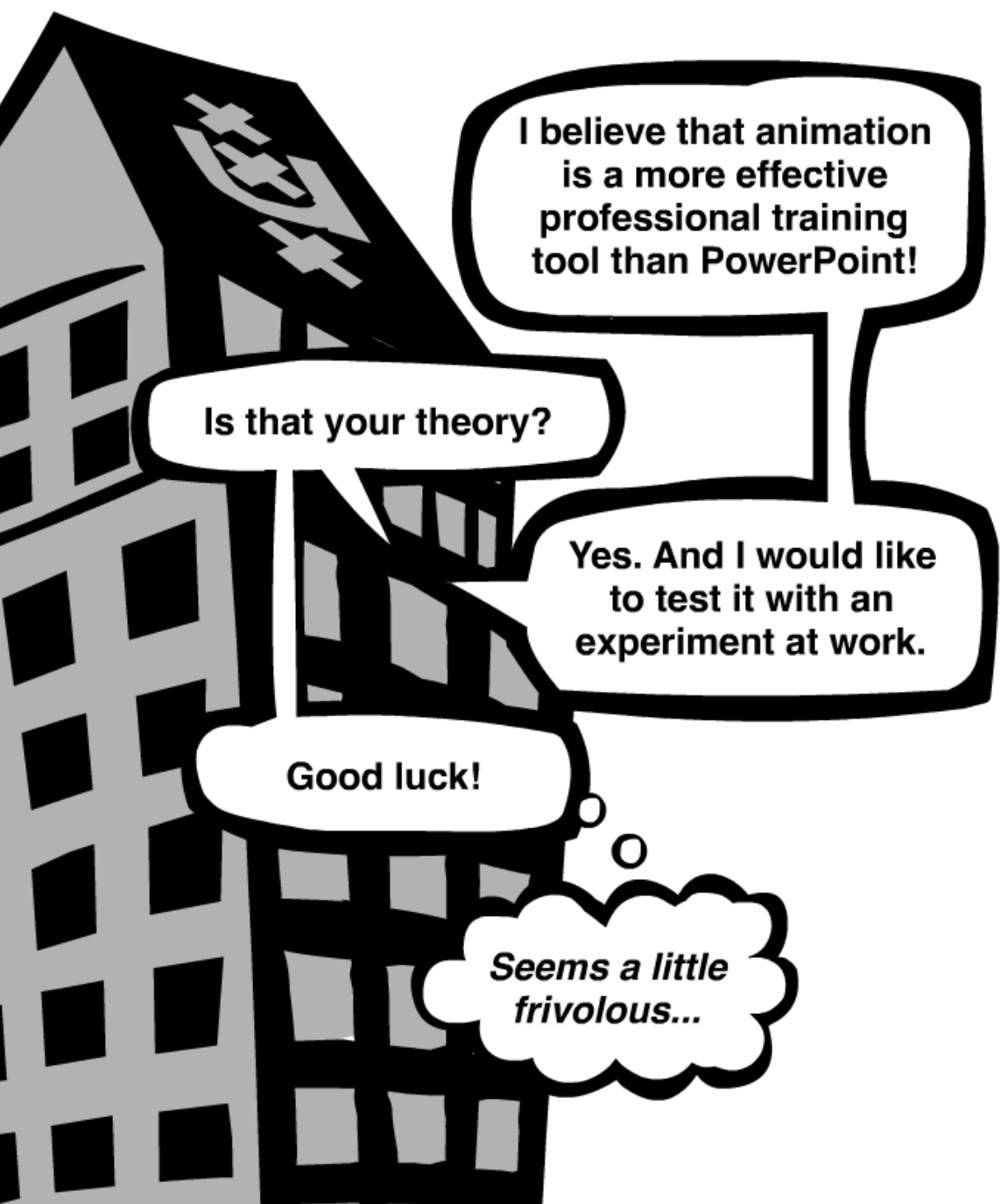


I *like* animation.
I use them to learn things
all the time. I *understand* things
better that way. And I always
share the good ones with
friends and colleagues...



Friday.

Deep in an Amsterdam university...



**I believe that animation
is a more effective
professional training
tool than PowerPoint!**

Is that your theory?

**Yes. And I would like
to test it with an
experiment at work.**

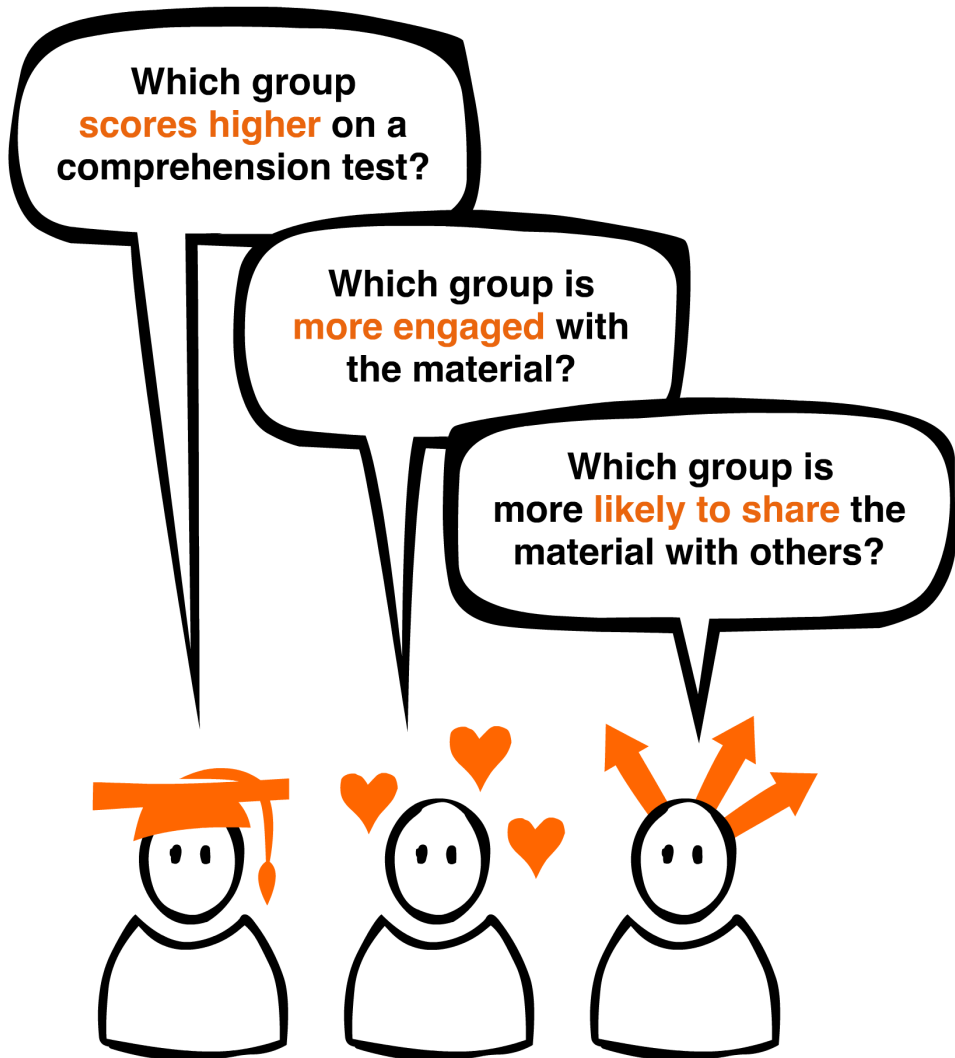
Good luck!

***Seems a little
frivolous...***

A small team of business school master's students and postal professionals set out to test whether animation is a more effective training tool than the traditional, text-heavy PowerPoint method.



"Effectiveness" was measured in three ways:



It was a simple experimental model: expose two groups of learners to two types of material, one animated and one text-based. And then ask them a few questions.

Found some training content!
A boring but vitally important regulation
change for our industry regarding European
VAT for incoming items outside EU borders
set to start in just six months' time!

(yawn) Perfect!
Let's get to work.



The two learning tools were created and loaded into the next big Town Hall event, scheduled for March 2020. The 167 participants were registered and ready to learn the material.

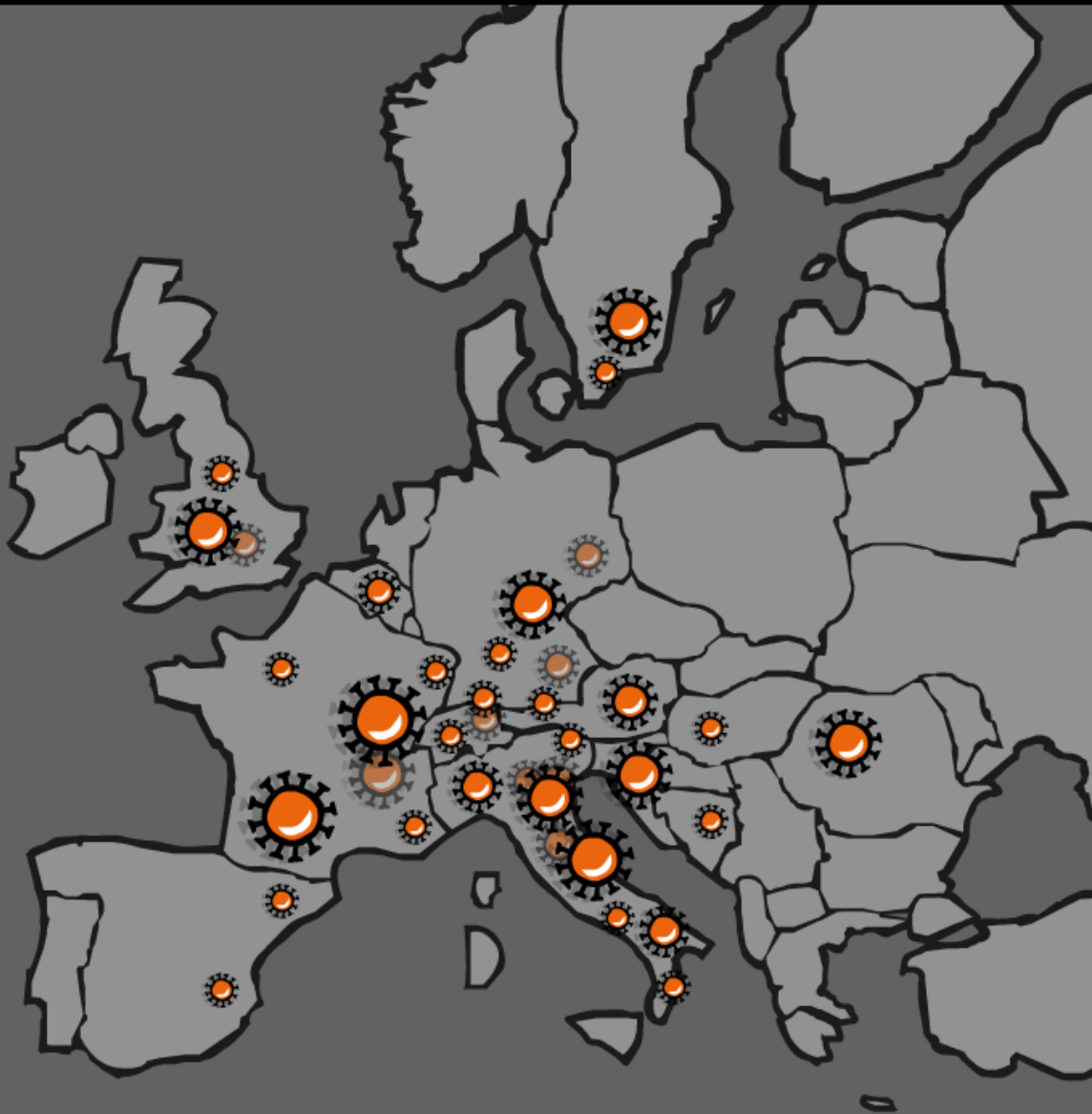
Meanwhile in Wuhan, China...

The Covid-19 epidemic was spreading quickly, decimating populations. Wuhan closed its borders and started instituting strict measures to control the spread of the virus.



*The virus spread throughout the country.
China closed its borders and went into lockdown.*

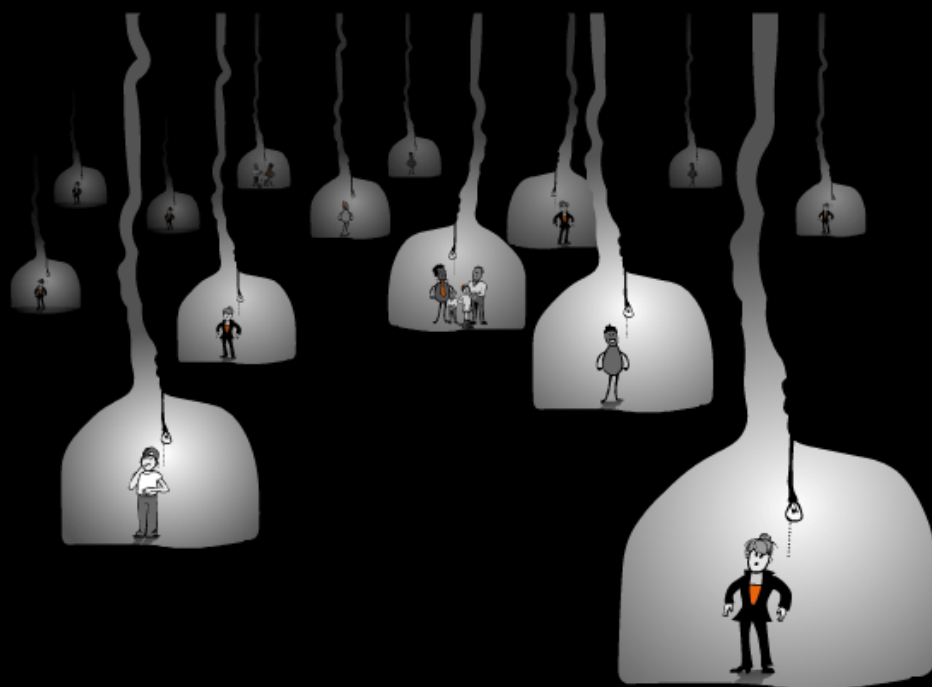
Covid reached Europe just weeks later, starting in Italy and spreading north.



Country after country sealed borders and started lockdowns. Daily case numbers spiraled upwards. In the Netherlands, we watched and waited.



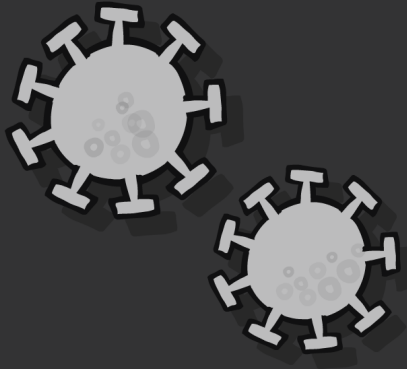
***Covid arrived in the Netherlands in late February.
Restaurants, shops, schools, cafes and offices shut
down. We all went underground, and worked, studied
and went to school online.***





All of us, of course, except delivery people, nurses, grocery store clerks and others who were still out there doing their jobs.





PART II: **the story**

Let's back up.



It's 42.000 BC.

A Storyteller gathers her tribe in the warmth and safety of a cave and tells a story from long ago. There was a village in danger. A young person receives the call from god or man to step forward and save it. Answering the call to adventure, he journeys through the thin membrane separating the real and mythical realms. Along the way he encounters fearsome monsters. A baffling labyrinth. Beautiful creatures that help him along the way. Valleys of darkness. Forests of dappled light.

The hero loses his way. His courage fails him. In his darkest moment, at the point of giving up, he connects with the greater wisdom of the universe, gathering insight beyond his mortal understanding about life, death, and the things he cannot see. Infused with purpose, he rises to meet the challenge, confronts the enemy and wins. He returns back through the membrane, back to his world, with new wisdom to enrich those around him. He is celebrated and reaps the rewards of his victory.

The Storyteller holds the attention of her tribe with her masterful use of simplicity and repetition. There are greater lessons embedded in the story which, thanks to the emotions she stirs up in her listeners, engrave themselves into their memories. Unafraid of silence, the dark power of the vacuum, her words fall like snow.

Drama, challenge, emotions, intensity. The story. The perfect vessel to deliver information essential to the tribe's survival. How to hunt for food. How to find the way home with the stars. Which berries to eat and which to avoid. Where rain comes from. The value of honesty. Loyalty. Who we are, and what our place is in this world.

Ever since the first cave-dwellers gathered around their fires, deep in the safety of their caves at the end of the day, they put their fingers to ink and drew. They wove together verbal and visual, creating illustrated tales of magical beasts, heroes and skygods. Accentuating stories with metaphor and mysticism, informing, entertaining and building that all-important emotional connection necessary to our survival.

The stories are a coating around the vital facts. How to make fire. How to bury the dead^[4]. The images remain to this day.

^[4] Caffaro (2018). Comprehension rates of safety pictorials affixed to agricultural machinery among Pennsylvania rural population. *Saf. Sci.* 103, 162–171.

Tsai (2008). Corporate marketing management and corporate-identity building. *Marketing intelligence & planning*.



Writing was invented nearly simultaneously by humans in four different places on earth, at roughly the same time; in Ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, Mesoamerica and China^[1]. It took different forms; cuneiform, hieroglyphics, brushstrokes. The first written words began appearing relatively recently, just 5,000 years ago.

Evidence of pictures and storytelling appear 40.000 years earlier.

We are still telling stories today. In our modern context, they are about Digital Transformation, Artificial Intelligence and cross border trade regulations. How to protect private data. How we use our tools and protect ourselves from cyber-attacks. These intricate products and processes require near immediate understanding and rapid implementation to survive and thrive in a vastly more complicated, interconnected world.

Humans are hard-wired to relate to and engage with a story. Our brains light up when we hear a tale of adventure in the same way it does when we have an actual experience^[2]. We feel with the hero and collectively recoil against the villain. Facts in a vacuum are meaningless and quickly forgotten, but the story is the silver thread that pulls our emotions along through the facts and information.

Once they have entered our long-term memories, they bind with our emotions; they are the strings we pull on to retrieve and apply the knowledge to our daily challenges.

Today's Master Storytellers recreate the stars and the fire in our conference stages and training rooms. Thanks to Covid, we are back in the cave; albeit digital; alone, disconnected and afraid. The use of silence, of simple words, of repetition, and the ability to bring listeners across the membrane into a different world, learning the information we need to survive this and future pandemics, gaining the courage and inspiration to remind us of who we are during the darker moments.

^[1] Boltz, W. G. (2000). The invention of writing in China. *Oriens extremus*, 42, 1-17.

^[2] Gillett, R. (2018, May 13). Why We're More Likely to Remember Content with Images and Video (Infographic). From Fast Company. [Electronic magazine]: <https://www.fastcompany.com/3035856/why-were-morelikely-to-remember-content-with-images-and-video-infogr>

Crisis Storytelling



Crisis Storytelling

We're here, now

We happen to be in the midst of an unfolding drama at this very moment in our collective history. One that is abundantly challenging, mysterious and strange, filling us with a sense of common mission and magic, bringing all of us into the story simultaneously, in every corner of the globe.

The stories we hear range from the very small to very large. We are cooking for an elderly neighbor or working at the front lines as a nurse. The stories cut through the cultures and languages that normally divide us and weave a vast textile of our common human experience. Because of Covid, we will all eventually share the memories of the loneliness and isolation as we passed through the membrane, and the joy of our return to the normal world.

Covid-19 arrived at our doorstep in February, 2020^[1]. By mid-March, offices, universities and schools emptied, leaving our cities ghostly and strange. Our tribes dispersed into isolation underground, reconnecting in the digital sphere. Life continued in two dimensions, flattened. Robbed of 90% of the information we get from body language, energy and intention that comes with the physical context, we continued with our work and our lives in the dark.

Our storytellers explained the new rules, shared to multiple platforms, cascaded organically. We all passed into this strange mythical realm alone, yet together; each of us a hero pushing into this peculiar journey through the underworld.

Alone with ourselves and our thoughts, many of us Buddha under our Bodhi trees, contemplating the irony of our experience. Or, never alone with a house full of device-addicted kids. Small heroes facing their own truths, building their formative memories of life in lockdown which will define and connect their generation for years to come.

Covid triggered a global regime of unprecedented mass learning. Before the year 2018, who had even heard of the terms "social distancing", "contact tracing" or "lockdowns"? Now, as we plough through our second year of the pandemic, almost everyone, young and old, has been exposed to the basics of viral transmission. We can communicate knowledgeably on the subject with the facility of first-year med students.

^[1] RIVM (June 12, 2020). Ontwikkeling COVID-19 in grafieken. Rijksinstituut voor Volksgezondheid en Milieu Ministerie van Volksgezondheid, Welzijn en Sport (RIVM). <https://www.rivm.nl/coronavirus-covid-19/grafieken>

The real world.



The mythical world.

This pandemic is exactly the kind of crisis we humans have the most difficulty understanding; slow-moving and at the same time spreading at the speed of light. Invisible, and at the same time, everywhere around us. A silent, patient killer that shape-shifts and eludes. It sent us underground, destroying our rituals and joyous events, making us feel disconnected and nonexistent. Forcing us into a regime of simultaneous, accelerated digital transformation as we abandoned our physical workspaces, our restaurants, our schools.

All of us; all around the world.

What will our world look like when we re-emerge, when we pass back through the membrane, to our physical spaces again? Will we return wiser, rich with insights gathered from our time of solitude and reflection? Will we reappear with new energy to re-imagine, re-create our broken world? Or will we simply slip back to the whirling distractions of our earthly pleasures, self-obsessed, thinking only for today? Was this pandemic a fluke? Or a glimpse of what's to come?

We still need the stars, the cave and the fire. The ability to tell our stories, make them understandable and convincing, to inspire and align people of many different backgrounds towards a common purpose. It's how we learn and understand, it's the secret of our resilience. Our oddly opposing needs for both fact and myth, for future and primal past, all co-exist peacefully in the vault of our minds. The pandemic reawakened our need for stories and connection.

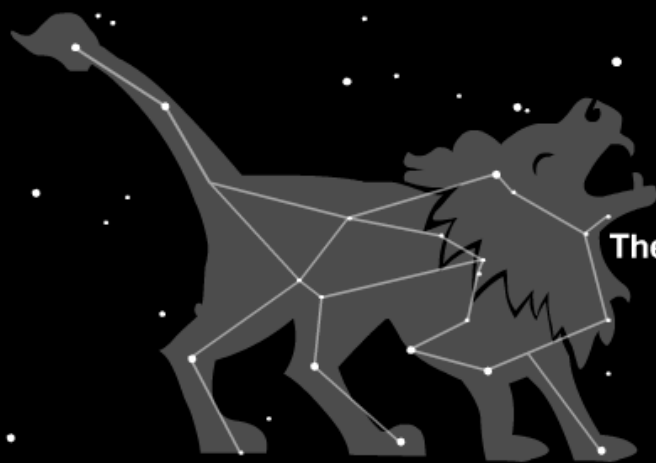
We are not so advanced and so tech that we cannot long for the shaman as urgently as we await the release of the newest iPhone.



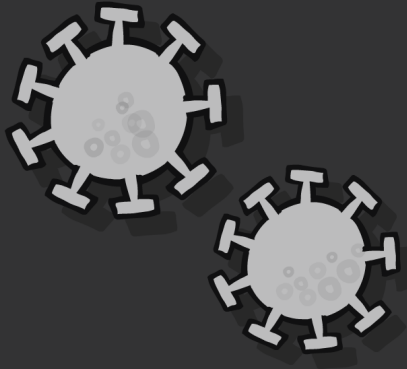
The Serpent



The Warrior

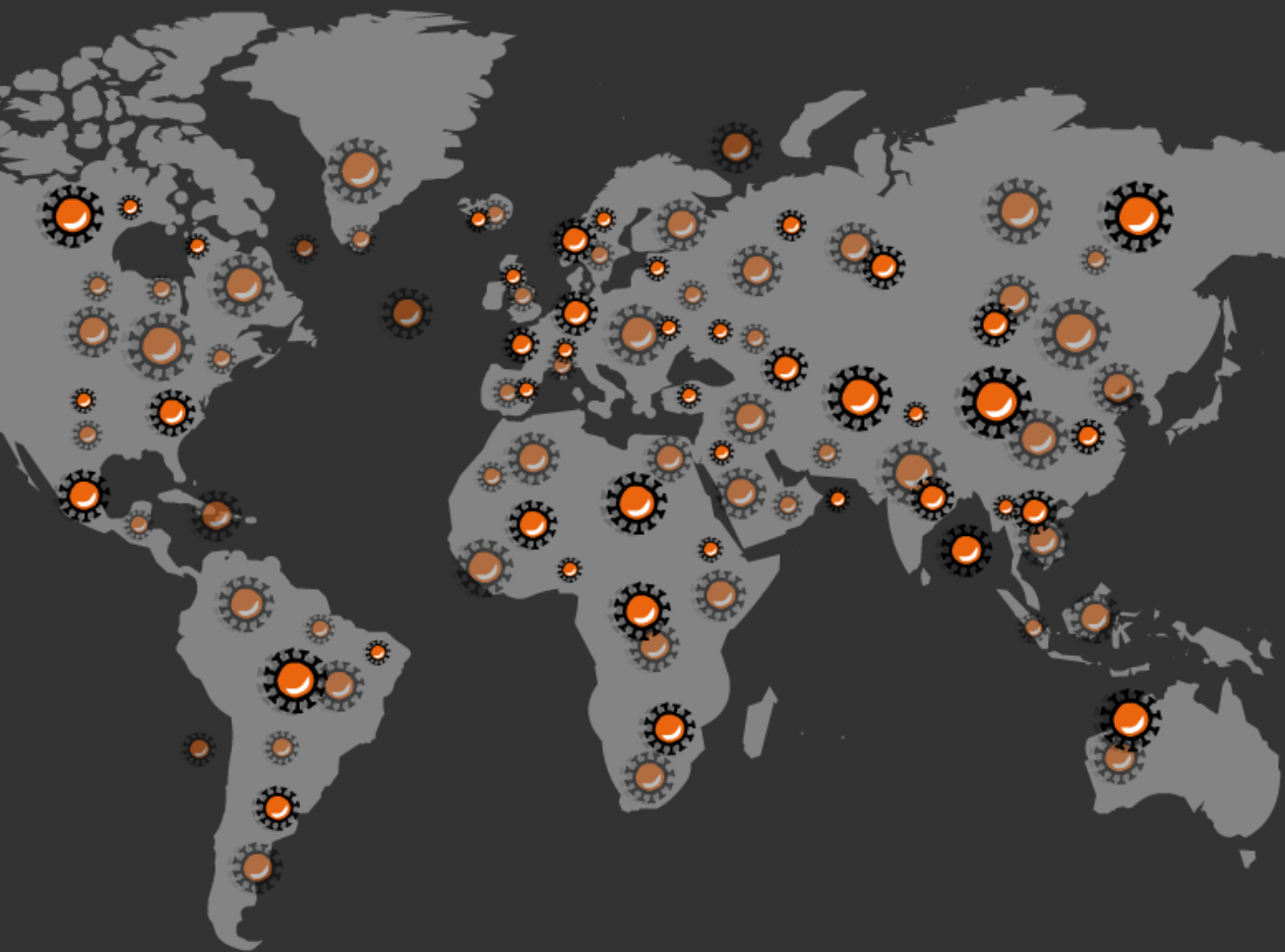


The Lion



PART III: **lockdown**

*Meanwhile... Covid-19 kept on spreading.
It was everywhere now.*



*New, stricter measures were introduced.
Borders closed.*

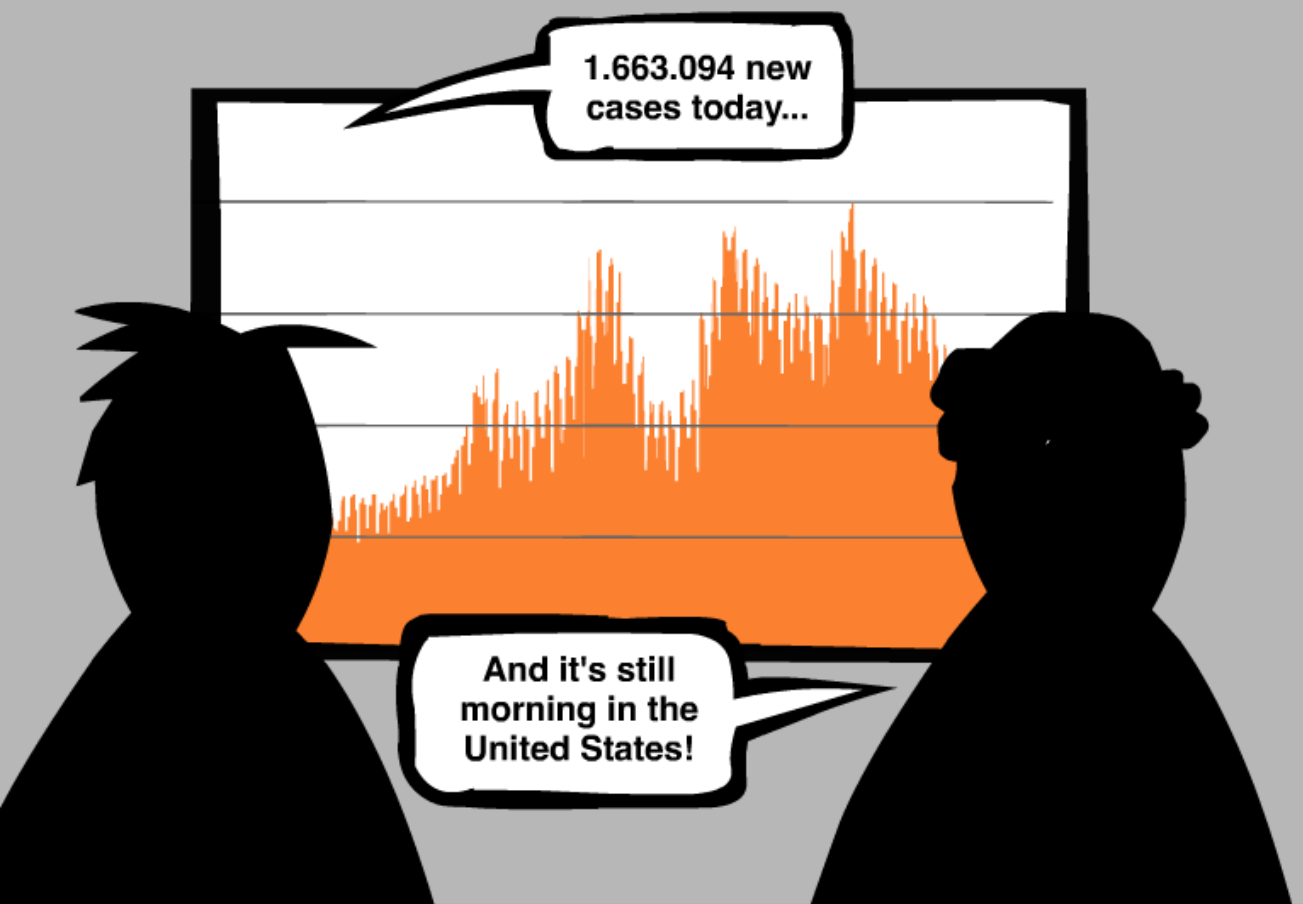
*Our cities emptied out.
We went underground
and carried out our work
in lockdown.*



People started hoarding. The shops quickly ran out of certain items. Toilet paper couldn't be found anywhere, online or offline.



*Summer came and went.
Daily global new case numbers spiraled upwards.*





Many of us lost our jobs. Some, our entire industries. Children, home from school, were stuck inside, unable to see their friends. They acted out. They became addicted to their devices, on-screen 24/7.



Working parents, for the most part, were too busy and exhausted to do anything about it.



***Some of us
were working
18-hour shifts,
risking their
lives on the
front lines.***

***Some of us were
alone, isolated.***



**Mom, I need
a papier-mâché
penguin by noon.**



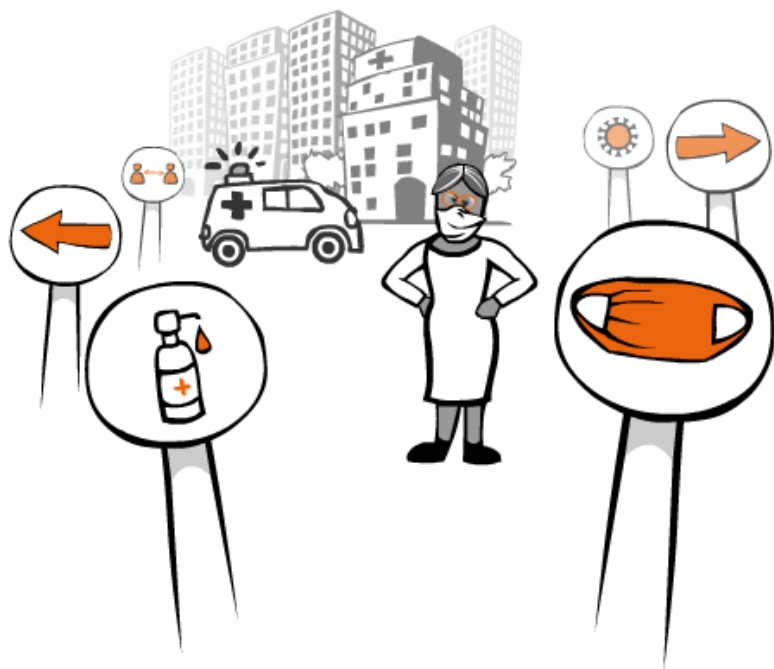
***Some of us were
never alone,
working fulltime,
homeschooling kids
at the same time.***

I'm in a call!

*Death
seemed
to be all
around us.*

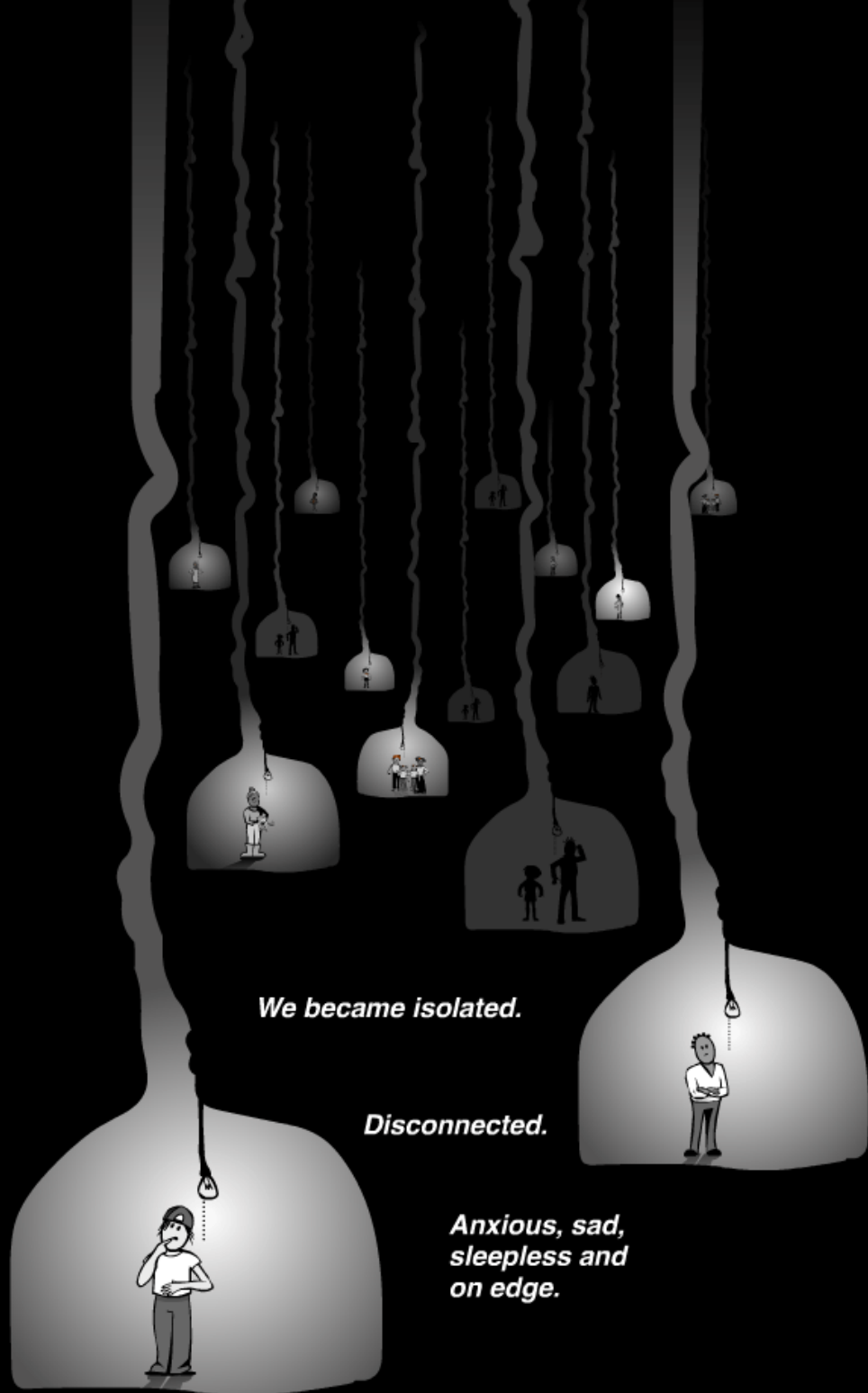


*When we ventured outside for groceries or to pick
up takeout Thai, we were practically bombarded with
visual communication.*



We became addicted to the latest announcements, news and daily case numbers. The tone of the messaging wasn't always what we needed.





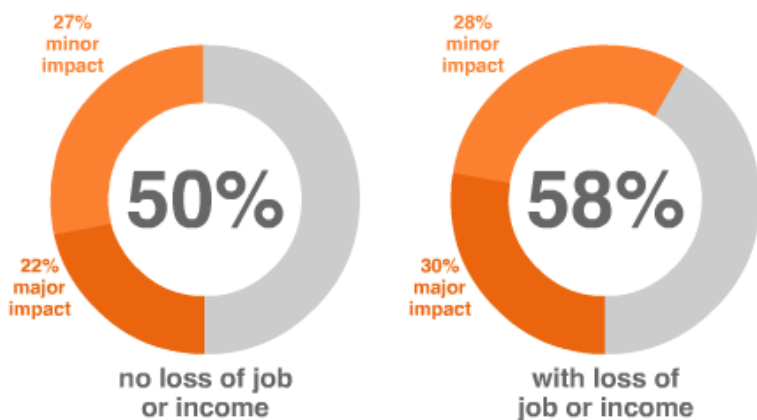
We became isolated.

Disconnected.

*Anxious, sad,
sleepless and
on edge.*

A sharp rise in mental health issues emerge as a result of our disconnection, exhaustion and loneliness, resulting in depression, drug and alcohol overuse, stress disorders, aggression and even suicide.

A lot of this spilled into our working lives.



Percentage of adults in the US stating that Covid-19 worry or stress has negatively affected their mental health.

And a rise in domestic abuse.

Cases of domestic violence during
prolonged lockdown, worldwide, 2020.

+31m

6 months in
lockdown

+45m

9 months in
lockdown



New heroes emerged. Braving the virus to do their jobs, making it possible for the rest of us to stay home.



The nurse.



The postman.



The teacher.

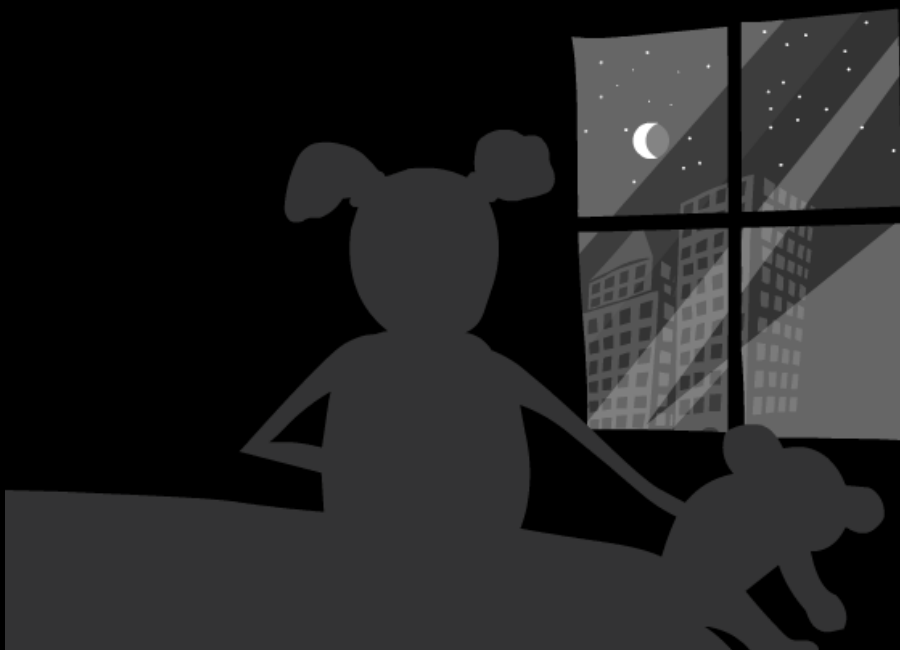


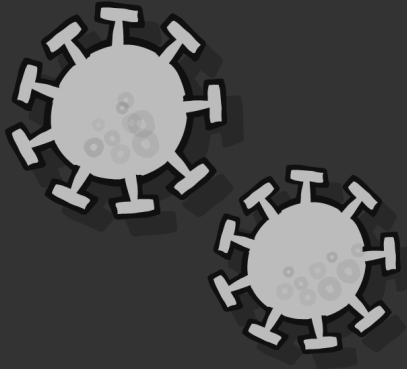
***The pizza
delivery guy.***

The rest of us felt like total losers.



But we were all heroes in our own, small way.





PART IV: **the world**

The World

Like an angry toddler shattering a Lego castle, the pandemic exploded our global economy into its smallest component parts. The impact was felt across nearly every sector, everywhere in the world.

Caught off guard, the result was unprecedented job loss and sharp declines in consumer spending^[1]. Uncertainty blew markets into sharp peaks and valleys, tempests and tailspins. Bankruptcies dumped talent wholesale onto the street.

Winners became giants, building teams clear across the borders that used to divide us – country, culture, language – sucking up Lego pieces under the sofa that they didn't have access to before. Towering monuments appeared practically overnight; eCommerce behemoths, digital platform giants; Covid-proof colossi forged by strange times.

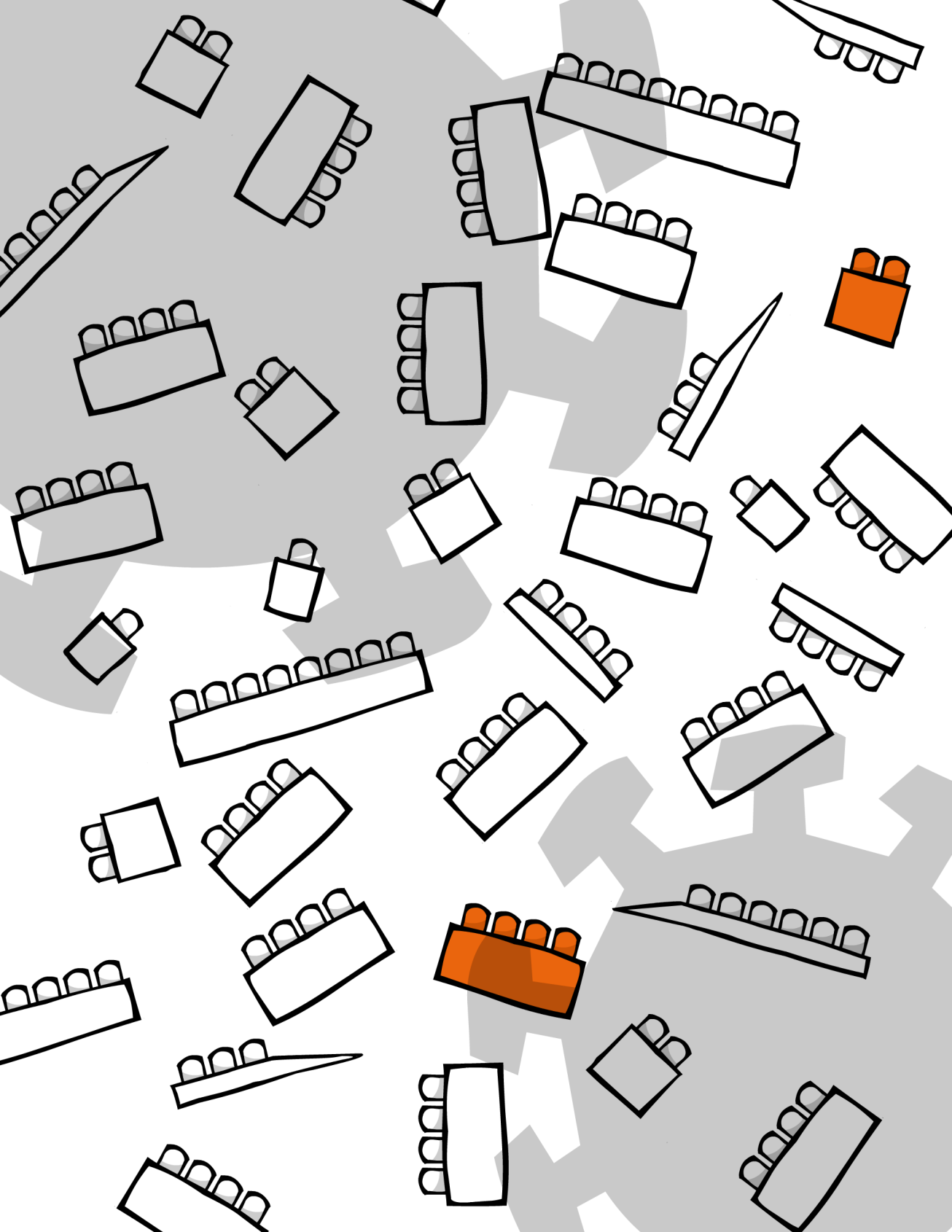
Many of us already realize that there is no going back. "Normal", as we have known it in the decades leading up to this moment, is partially what got us into this mess in the first place. It could be a new world - if we have the courage to build with intention and create according to a collective vision.

As we emerge from lockdown, we will need to reorganize our societies on a massive scale. Globally, remotely. Reconnect, rebuild the structures of our social lives. Envisioned in the digital bunker, resilient by necessity, this new world will look very different from our "BC" (Before Covid) work and play environments. Even if we tell ourselves otherwise.

For one thing, this new world will be much more diverse and inclusive than before^[2]. Partially by necessity, partially by design, possibly thanks to our desires to connect on a more human-to-human level, all of us stamped similarly with the memories and scars of our trauma. There is more that binds us together as a global tribe, now, than divides us.

^[1] Wolfe, N. (2020, April 15). COVID-19 Won't Be the Last Pandemic. Here's What We Can Do to Protect Ourselves. From Time.com: <https://time.com/5820607/nathan-wolfe-coronavirus-future-pandemic>

^[2] Sneader, K. a. (2020, March). Beyond coronavirus: The path to the next normal. From McKinsey & Company: <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/healthcare-systems-and-services/our-insights/beyond-coronavirus-the-path-to-the-next-normal>



Diversity

Well before Covid shook our foundations, we understood that diversity enriches our talent pool, drives financial performance and has PR benefits to project to the wider world. Diversity means embracing a flexible, global workforce operating across multiple time zones. The work grinds on, Sundays and Saturdays, through Christmas, Diwali and Lunar New Year's alike; simply because days and holidays mean something different to each of us^[i].

Diversity means incorporating the wider views of the world into a company culture and drawing on these varied perspectives to solve everyday problems. This means tapping into a broader range of languages, cultures, religions, backgrounds, competences, skillsets and specializations^[ii].

Today's definition of diversity stretches to include a spectrum of gender identities, ability, neurodiversity, refugee status, age and more in our new working arenas^[iii].

Rebuilding the post-Covid world will take all of us. Explaining the vision going forward will require us to communicate in a way that everyone can understand and gather behind. We will need new powers of persuasion to inform, inspire, engage and connect.

Complex concepts that make our world run also need to be understood by a wider range of global professionals of varying levels and abilities. This presents new challenges for communication. Firstly, linguistically; as we scale up, a larger proportion of our workforce will not share a common language. English, our default, is the lingua Franca for our multinational companies; however only 20% speak it as natives^[iv].

^[i] Lorenzo, R., & Reeves, M. (2018). How and where diversity drives financial performance. Harvard Business Review, 30.

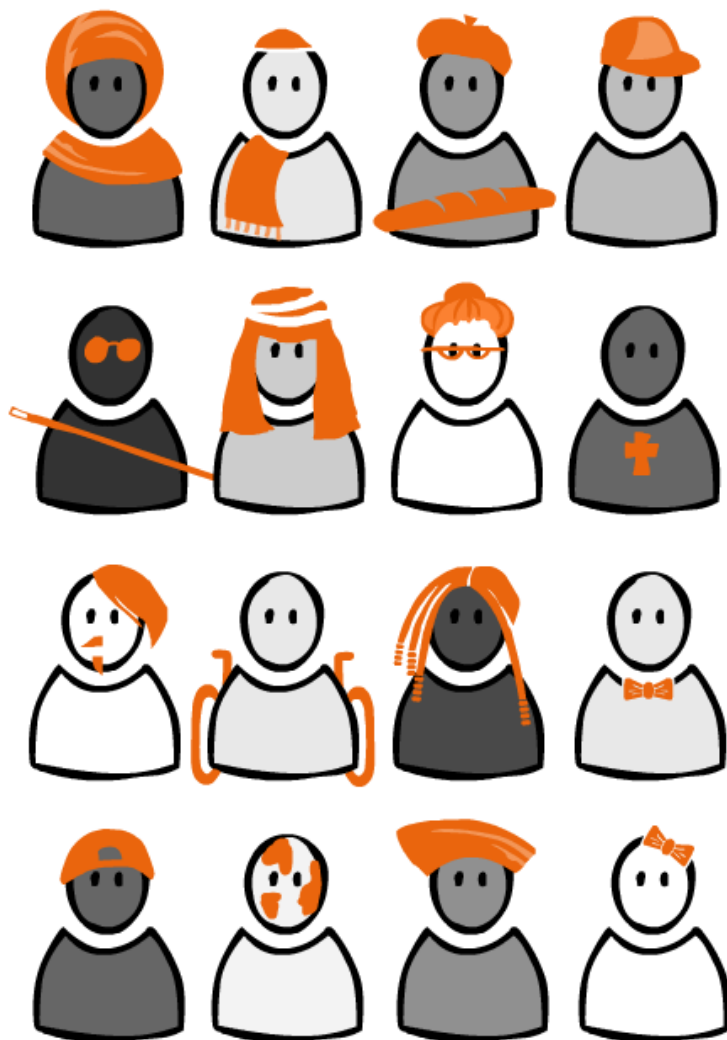
^[ii] Lorenzo, R. V. (2018). How diverse leadership teams boost innovation. Boston Consulting Group.

^[iii] Rahman, U. H. (2019). Diversity Management and the Role of Leader. Open Economics, 2(1), 30-39.

^[iv] Gajšt, N. (2014). Business English as a lingua franca—a cross-cultural perspective of teaching English for business purposes. English Language Overseas Perspectives and Enquiries, ELOPE: E 11(2), 77-87.

Palmer-Silveira, J. (2019). Introducing Business Presentations to Non-Native Speakers of English: Communication Strategies and Intercultural Awareness.

Diversity.



From a biological perspective, we are not all that different. We humans share 99.9% of our DNA, making us less genetically varied than any other species, including the chimpanzee, our nearest relative^[ii]. We are much more alike than unlike and we all pretty much need the same things. We respond to warmth and humor and share the need for connection and communication.

Post-Covid communication will need to get serious about projecting diversity, inclusion and belonging. And, pick up the pace. The communicate-understand-implement-learn-repeat sequence is growing ever faster as we hurtle into the future^[iii].

Whether it's high-speed scale-ups onboarding a fully remote workforce, a new global product rollout that needs to be picked up by sales teams simultaneously across the globe, concepts need to be instantly understandable by a broad demographic for rapid implementation.

We still put great emphasis on text-based communication even though it's painfully slow and ignores the needs of non-native speakers. We still stubbornly use text-heavy PowerPoints to train people. We still write long-form white papers to explain our new ideas that few people have the time to read or sufficiently understand thanks to our varying command of language.

We send out lengthy, wordy newsletter emails, filled with words, words, words... and at the same time, say nothing. Nothing, because they often go unread. They linger in our inboxes waiting for just the right moment when we have 45 consecutive minutes with no interruptions, no meetings, no deadlines and no noise.

Reams of text take time to consume, require high levels of linguistic ability, demand long-form focus and are difficult to share digitally^[iii]. Long-form written messaging is designed for one-way communication. It is a broadcast from speaker to receiver, and that is where it ends. Top-down and unidirectional, it is uninterested in how the message lands or whether it is understood. This is communication belonging to another age.

^[ii] Ramsey, L. and Lee, S. "Humans share almost all of our DNA with cats, cattle and mice", The Independent. Accessed November 23, 2020. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/science/human-dna-share-cats-cattle-mice-same-genetics-code-a8292111.html>

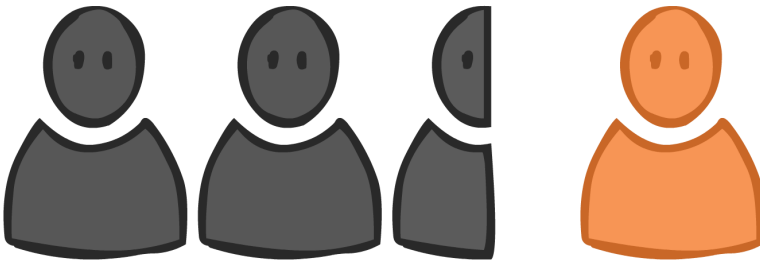
Jorde, L. B. 2003. Genetic variation and human evolution. American Society of Human Genetics. Available at: <https://www.ashg.org/education/pdf/geneticvariation.pdf> (accessed November 23, 2020).

^[iii] Perreault (2012). The pace of cultural evolution. PLoS One.

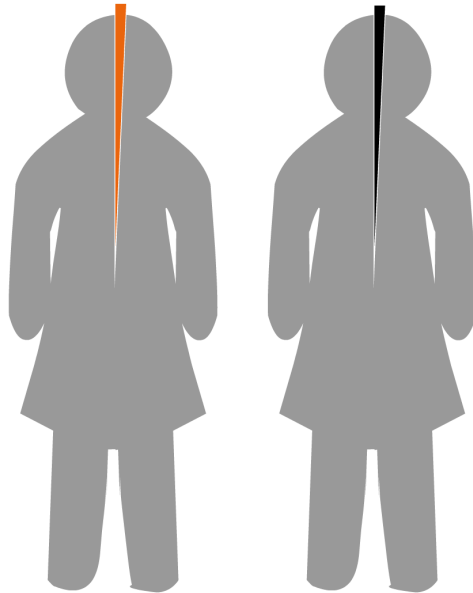
^[iii] Ihator (2001). Communication style in the information age. Corporate Communications: An International Journal.

**Non-native
English speakers
outnumber
native speakers by**

2.5 to 1



Humans share
99.9%
of their DNA.



Less genetically
diverse **than any**
other species.

Long-form text is not your friend in a crisis.

A crisis is an unforeseen emergency that takes hold of us from out of nowhere. A crisis cannot be met with a prepared, gamed-out response plan nor can crisis communication be pre-written and stakeholder pre-approved. Only fast-paced creative thinking can identify solutions to quickly-changing scenarios followed by disciplined action, supported by effective messaging. The cycle is circular and iterative, a disciplined communicate-listen two-step.

Good crisis response is a competitive business advantage in our new age of global uncertainty. Organizations that do this well recover quickly and even exceed pre-crisis value with stocks closing an average 7% higher one year later[□]. A poor crisis response rocks an organization back on its heels, implementing ill-considered, scattershot reactive responses.

Getting crisis communication right is an essential part of the business proposition, for the short-term (getting past the crisis) and long-term (crisis-proofing the future). These two goals are equally necessary, in equal measure to build a sustained, crisis-proof advantage.

[□] Garcia, H. F. (2006). Effective leadership response to crisis. *Strategy & Leadership*.



Terminology



Terminology for the Post-Covid Age

Barista to Boardroom* – an approach to the implementation of communication and/or learning that is targeted for every level of the organization.

Customer Education – marketing materials designed to enrich a potential customer's understanding of an aspect of the industry which might impel them to purchase a new product or service. An indirect marketing technique.

Enterprise Social Media – the use of digital social networks that share business interests and activities. Often a result of enterprise social software used by large companies to organize communication, collaboration and other aspects of their intranets.

H2H Communication* – “Human 2 Human”: messaging which is designed to recreate a conversation between two people.

Media-Rich – digital messaging which goes beyond text. Animation, video and even still imagery or stand-alone audio can all be considered “rich” when compared with pure text communication.

Micromessaging* – communication designed for digital platforms for single-issue messaging, designed for social delivery and mobile consumption. Uses minimal text and supported by visuals, animation, video or sound.

Listen-communicate two-step* – With every outgoing communication stream there is an equal and opposite response from the receiver, which is an integral part of the complete cycle. This can only be collected with robust, built-in listening channels.

Listening channels* – the means of collecting a real-time response from the targets of the communication. Whether for social media or traditional newsletter-style emails, listening channels are only effective if the information received back from the public is heard and impacts further communication and/or policy.

Iterative Communication* – communication which more closely resembles an organic, H2H conversation, where the direction and tone of the original message changes reactively to the incoming response of the listener.

Storytelling – communication which is based on a narrative, necessarily a human-based tale which the listener is able to relate to on a visceral, personal basis.

Sympathetic Presencing – originally conceived for the medical and nursing industry, the practice of relating to a person with whom you are having a business relationship on a human level, employing empathy, non-judgmental listening and (physical) presence.

Vertical group – a target group for messaging which is highly diverse in terms of linguistic ability, educational level, and cognitive capacity. A more challenging target than a homogenous group for the design of educational material.

Visual Communication* – communication which is text-minimal and image-heavy. Telling the story with pictures rather than words.



Be a Human

Micromessage

Listen

Go Visual

Go Small

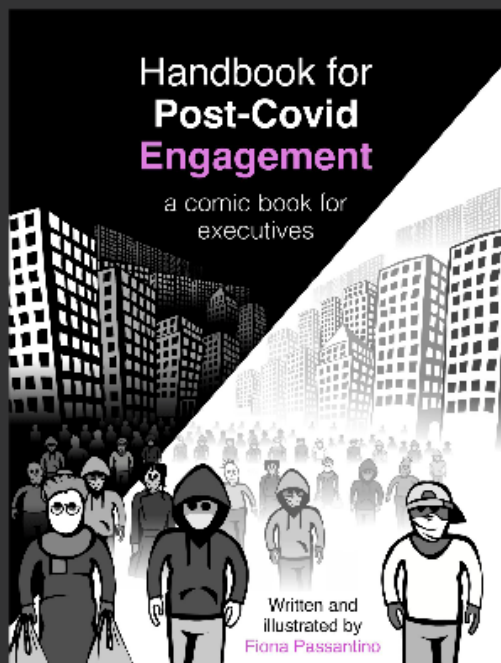
Go Big



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About the author

Speaker, author, blogger, YouTuber, leadership coach and comic book illustrator, Fiona is an executive coach for matters of culture and engagement for large multinationals. Her latest book in the Comic Books for Executives series is titled *The Handbook for Post-Covid Engagement*.



Long before the pandemic changed everything about the way we live and work, Fiona Passantino started as an old-school comic artist, writer and game designer. In 2020 she achieved a masters in management, and then worked as Creative Lead, Senior Visual Communicator, Innovation Advisor, Explainer and Storyteller for some of the largest multinationals in Europe, hopping from Vienna, London, Budapest to Brussels and Amsterdam. She now lives in the Hague with her family.

