

Dear Governor Mike DeWine,

With the recent news of our team's involvement in unsafe social gatherings, it is imperative that we address the **Why**, the **What**, and the **How** of the situation. Forming a public response that addresses these three elements is the first step in resuscitating the platform that we have worked so hard to build and in continuing the fight against COVID. After all, this is bigger than us. This is about the health of the people of Ohio and the United States.

The Why

Why did this situation occur? Why did Mike DeWine, a national leader in the fight against COVID, hypocritically defy Ohio lockdown procedures with members of his staff? Moreover, why did his team engage in these unsafe parties for a period of at least 8 weeks, all the while preaching the importance of lockdowns, mask mandates, and social distancing? These are the implicit questions that members of the public and media have in their minds. This is the confusion that we must first resolve.

Let us begin by asking ourselves why the parties occurred. Were we strategizing for the coming weeks? Strengthening team morale? Relieving stress? Whatever the answer, I suggest that we respond honestly and frankly. The public and the media will not care for any excuses but at least we can proactively provide context that will bring clarity and paint a fuller story.

A word of caution: When addressing the why, I must also state my hope that you **avoid the trap** of shifting the blame to members of your staff or claiming naivety about what was occurring. Both options will undermine your moral character and standing as a

man who “shows his concern about the impact of his choices” (Witte & Zezima, 2020). In politics, naivety is an erroneous choice, not an out. As your staff is an extension of you, you must apologize and own the **why** of the situation.

The What

What will our response be? The answer to this question can be oriented around two goals: 1) Urging others to practice safe behavior (not mimicking our own) and 2) Earning back trust.

Governor DeWine, one of your strengths is your unrelenting pursuit of facts and your humble deference to scientific and medical professionals. Thanks in part to your adherence to the facts and nonpartisan positionality, COVID cases are going down in Ohio. However, the recent news has the power to discredit your stance and all that has been accomplished. The last thing we want is for Ohioans to defy lockdown orders and congregate at super-spreader events. Thus, I encourage you to let it be known that **what we did was risky and hypocritical**. People need to know about the real and probable repercussions of the gatherings we engaged in. If anyone from our team has tested positive for COVID, I would encourage you to proactively inform the press and the public. They may not take you seriously, at least not while we are still resuscitating your image, but it is important for them to take the health risks seriously.

Another word of caution: There is a common tendency amongst people found to be hypocritical to deny the accusations lobbed at them so that they can preserve their integrity (Khazan, 2017). **This is a trap** that I hope we avoid. It would be in our best

interest to not downplay the seriousness of the offense. The strength of simple stated facts (i.e., “That was us. We did not have masks on nor were we sufficiently socially distancing”) will go a long way to reestablishing trust.

The How

Moving forward, **how** can we ensure that your actions reflect your words? Here are three tactics to consider:

1. Stay in the public eye and always be masked. In order to replace the image of a partying Governor Mike DeWine, it is important to embed the image of a perpetually masked Governor Mike DeWine in people’s minds. No more social gatherings will be attended by you or any staff member. Photos of mundane home life are to be prioritized so that people know you are in it together with them. You can also issue a challenge: If anyone takes a photo of a maskless Governor DeWine in a public setting, you will resign. While this may seem extreme, the action would show commitment and speak towards your sense of accountability.
2. Redirect attention away from yourself and towards local heroes who have been abiding by the lockdown orders. Even though your current credibility has taken a hit, the credibility of local people is still intact and perhaps stronger than ever (in comparison). Whether we highlight a young child celebrating their birthday in the solitude of their home or the cautious lifestyles of essential workers, we can encourage others to #bebetter than us.

3. Double-down on science. Use your platform to share all relevant CDC developments as they come in without inserting extra commentary. Aim for selflessness. We can source inspiration from Greta Thunberg when she “submitted the IPCC’s report on limiting warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius in lieu of testifying to the House. Attached was a short letter that said: ‘I am submitting this report as my testimony because I don’t want you to listen to me. I want you to listen to the scientists...’ She refuses to allow her opinions to become the focus” (Roberts, 2019). Remember, this is bigger than us.

Governor DeWine, it is my hope that you find this memo to be of use. While earning back public trust will be challenging, the values of accountability, transparency, and humility will guide us forward.

Sincerely,

Harsh J. Gagoomal

P.S. I recently learned that British Prime Minister Boris Johnson emailed 100 people about a gathering for “socially distanced drinks” (Lawless, 2022). I am not sure if this will shift any scrutiny away from us, but it will be something to keep track of in the weeks to come.

References

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