

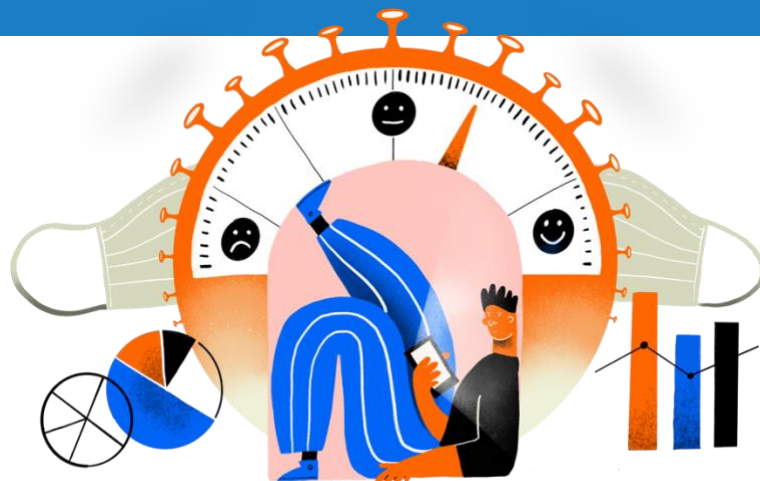
REPORT 15

Even tough nuts can be cracked in a motivational way!

The Motivation Barometer

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Reference: Motivation Barometer (October 14, 2020). Even tough nuts can be cracked in a motivational way! Ghent, Belgium.



Infection rates are rapidly increasing and hospitals are once again under pressure. The new government team therefore faced the challenge last week of communicating a set of stricter measures to turn the tide as quickly as possible. This was a difficult decision: this crisis has already lasted too long and we have unpleasant memories of the stricter measures of last summer. Yet Prime Minister De Croo and Minister Vandenbroucke succeeded in their mission to communicate in a motivating way. For the first time, the motivation of the population to adhere to the measures increased after the announcement of stricter measures. Hopefully this government team can continue this form of motivational communication.

Rising motivation

The Motivation Barometer of Ghent University has been mapping the population's motivation to comply for more than 7 months. In total, 75,110 participants (71% women, average age = 51.7 years) completed an online survey measuring their motivation, resilience, and well-being. The Motivation Barometer sheds light on motivational support for the measures. There are different types of motivation. It is especially crucial that the population chooses to follow the measures on their own initiative and remains fully convinced of their necessity. A lot of research in motivational psychology shows that this voluntary motivation is a much stronger predictor of persistence than 'must'-ivation. This is the type of motivation in which people feel obligated to adhere, for example, to avoid a fine, criticism, or disdain from others. In addition, the data from the Motivation Barometer itself show very convincingly that voluntary motivation is a much more powerful predictor of corona measure persistence than 'must'-ivation (Morbée et al., 2021).

While up to 81% of the respondents fully supported the measures at the beginning of the crisis, this motivational support quickly decreased to only 22.2% during the summer season. The new government team had no choice but to present an appealing and unifying story at its first press conference. In the past, the motivation of the population only increased after the introduction of relaxations of the measures (see report 9). The question was therefore whether it is possible to maintain, or even increase, motivation when announcing more strict measures. At first glance, this seems like an extremely difficult task. After all, strict measures are more likely to threaten our autonomy and our relatedness, which are a basis for our well-being (see Report 3). However, the latest results of the Motivation Barometer show that stricter measures do not necessarily have to demotivate the population. As shown in Figure 1, voluntary motivation increased in the days following the first duo press conference of ministers De Croo and Vandenbroucke. The motivational support today is 49.5%. This increase is also noticeable for other important motivational indicators, such as the feeling of being able to continue to adhere to the set of measures as a whole and the belief in the effectiveness of the measures.

Observation 1: The positive news is that the motivation of the population is rising since the first press conference of Prime Minister De Croo and Minister Vandenberghe.

The demotivating effect of confusing and ill-timed relaxations

This recent rise in motivation is notable because it stops the decline in voluntary motivation that was initiated after former Prime Minister Wilmès' last press conference. On September 23, she announced a number of rationalizations and relaxations of measures. For example, the number of close contacts was no longer a family right but an individual privilege. Because the epidemiological barometer was not launched at that time, it was unclear to the population how this relaxation of the measures could be justified and how long it would be in effect before stricter measures were once again necessary. When asked how respondents (N = 4616) perceived this tweaking, 78% said they suspected others would follow suit to a (very) great extent. At the same time, 56% found this readjustment (too) lax and 72% reported experiencing (much) more concern because of this relaxation. Thus, from the beginning, a large part of the population distrusted the relaxation of the measures.

As infection rates continued to rise in the days following the September 23 press conference, Wilmès quickly retraced her steps and threatened new, stricter measures. This flip-flopping of communication took a motivational toll.

Figure 1. Shifts in voluntary motivation, 'must'-ivation, and disincentive.

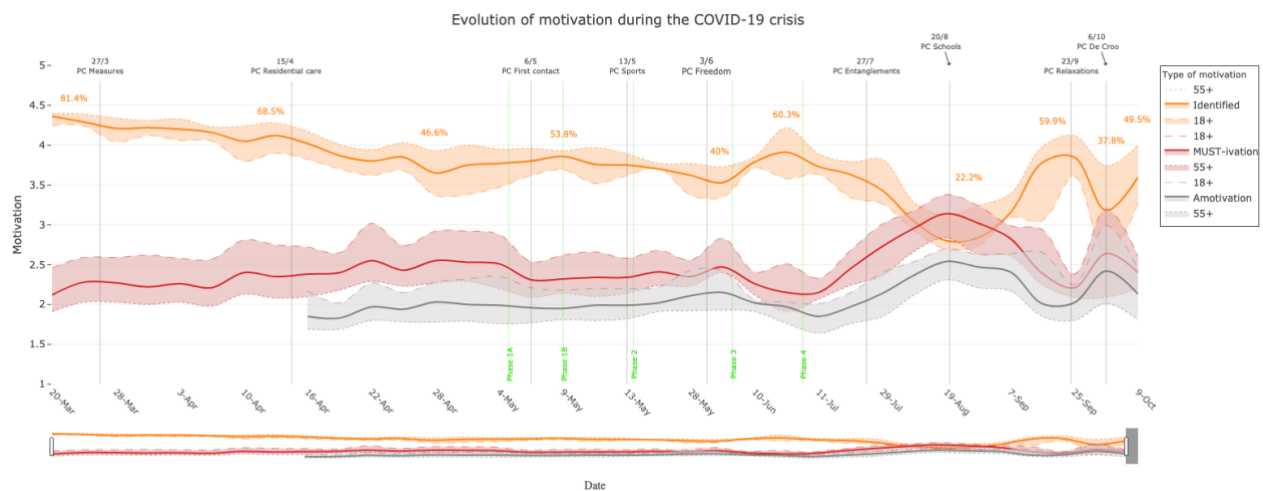
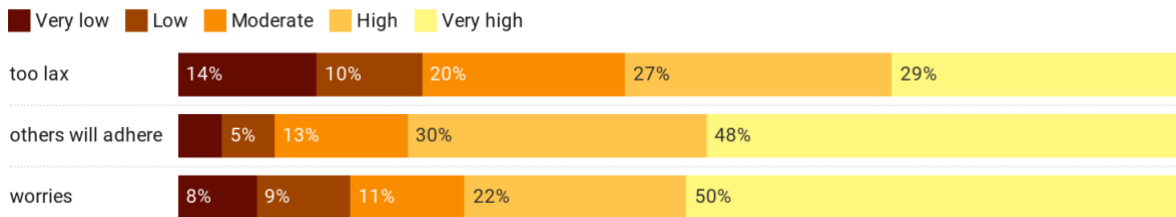


Figure 2. Perceptions of the measure concerning close contacts

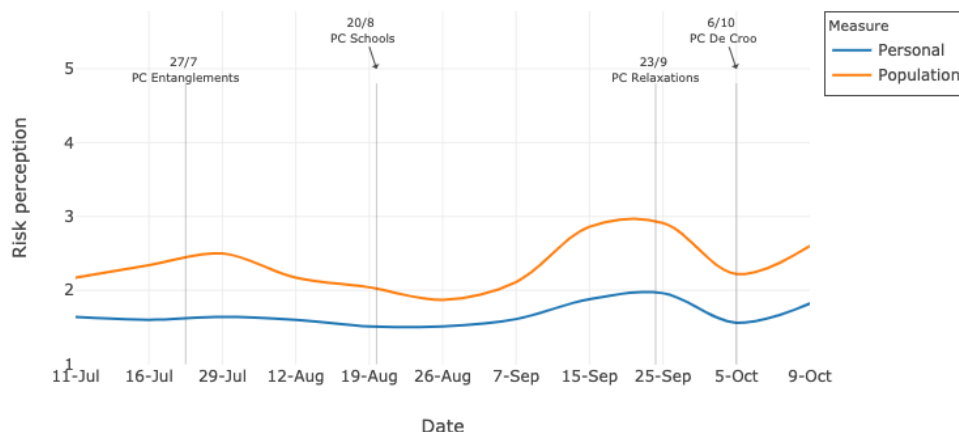


As shown in Figure 1, voluntary motivation decreased in the aftermath of September 23, while 'must'-ivation and discouragement increased. At the same time, Figure 3 showed that the population's risk perception of becoming (seriously) infected declined, while it just peaked leading up to the September 23 press conference. The high risk perception indicated a high support among the population to be cautious and to accept strict measures. Thus, because risk perception was high, there were opportunities to introduce stricter measures. This may even have been necessary to prevent the high risk perception from turning into anxiety and fear.

In short, Wilmès' relaxations on September 23 proved to be the wrong signal to the population at the time. Instead of seizing the momentum to act decisively and turn the tide of rising infection rates, the population was granted relaxations that were not fully understood. But it is a fallacy to think that to motivate means to necessarily spare the population. Therefore, this relaxation did not translate into increased motivation this time, on the contrary. Rather, the relaxations of the measures combined with the threat of tightening measures had a demotivating effect. Because the government celebrated at the wrong time and left a wait-and-see impression, a motivational resignation arose among the population.

Determination 2: The population is motivated to adhere to (strict) measures appropriate to the risk level of the pandemic. Not responding in a timely and decisive manner has a negative effect on the population's motivation.

Figure 3. Shifts in individual and collective perceptions of risk



Motivational communication from Prime Minister De Croo and Minister Vandenbroucke

To introduce more strict and difficult measures, motivational leadership is necessary. Previous results from the Motivational Barometer (see Report 5) show that a motivational communication style increases motivation, which encourages citizens to persevere. To distinguish motivational from demotivational communication practices, the motivation compass in Figure 4 is useful. Both communicative do's and don'ts can be placed in this compass. The horizontal axis in the figure reflects the degree to which governments and politicians communicate and act in a motivational way, with the zones on the right (e.g., attuning) being perceived as motivational and the zones on the left (e.g., domineering) being perceived as demotivational. The vertical axis reflects the extent to which government and politicians communicate and act in a directive and guiding manner (e.g., clarifying) or whether they do so only to a limited extent (e.g., awaiting).

Respondents felt that, on average, there was more motivational than demotivational communication during the new government's press conference. Analyses of the Wilmès government's communication style (see Report 5) indicated an inverse pattern. Respondents found the communication of Prime Minister De Croo and Minister Vandenbroucke particularly clarifying and attuning for the following reasons:

- the new measures were clearly explained
- the need for it was highlighted
- the burden of the measures was empathically and authentically named and acknowledged
- the efforts of the people were appreciated
- the hope that together we can turn the tide was expressed
- a connecting story was brought

Green Christmas

Table 1 provides an overview of the various do's and don'ts in communication, illustrated with concrete examples for inspiration. Next Friday, the long-awaited epidemiological barometer will be introduced. As argued in an opinion article on behalf of the expert group 'psychology and corona', it offers many psychological benefits: clarity, predictability, goal orientation and co-responsibility. In communication, too, this barometer can provide a fresh start, both among this new government team, government agencies, and experts.

Figure 4. Motivating and demotivating styles of the leadership compass.

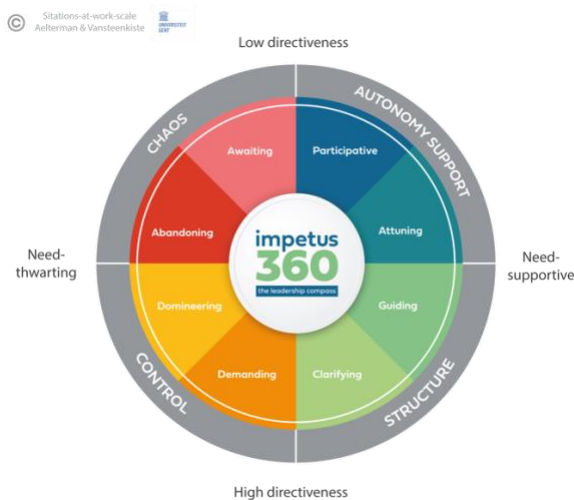
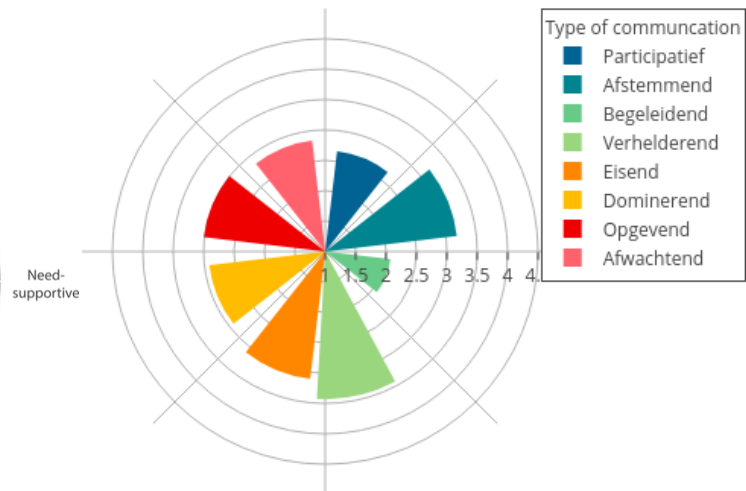


Figure 5. Results of perceptions of (de)motivating government communication



We sincerely hope that we may continue to walk this path of motivational communication together. This will be necessary because even stricter, but necessary measures are tough motivational nuts to crack! Let us all go for the common goal: to care for each other, to get the virus small, and in the end, who knows, even to experience a green Christmas!

Finding 3: The new government's communication during its first press conference was perceived as motivating rather than demotivating.

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Table 1. Do's and don'ts of motivating and demotivating communication

Zone	Checklist	Explanation and example
Participative	Do you test the support for a measure and communicate about it through dialogue and co-creation ?	It is crucial to actively involve representatives of target groups (e.g. student representatives, religious community representatives) in the development of protocols and communication proposals through dialogue and co-creation.
	Do you make citizens aware of the choices they have and the consequences?	To avoid a tightening being perceived as a straitjacket, it is a good idea to make citizens aware of their choices within the restrictions.
	To what extent do you encourage citizens to take co-responsibility ?	It is important to encourage citizens to make thoughtful decisions about their behavior. To this end, the consequences of different options should be clear (e.g., predicted impact of curtailing or broadening close contacts).
	Do you provide a meaningful and logical explanation for introducing, maintaining, or (partially) relaxing a measure, tailored to the target audience?	The more the population understands why a measure must be introduced or retained, the greater the willingness to follow it. It is crucial that the explanations offered are attuned to the living environment of the target group concerned.
	Do you show understanding and empathy for the efforts of the people?	Try to be grateful for the burden the citizens are carrying today. By explicitly showing your gratitude for the efforts, you are putting yourself in an empathetic position. In this way, the population feels more understood and remains more willing to put forth the effort requested.

Attuning

Do you work **connectively** by pointing out solidarity and the collective interest?

Helping others, doing something for the weak, caring for each other are important values that almost everyone values. Emphasize that following the measures helps to realize these core values.

Do you provide **playful** elements that resonate well with the target audience?

Fun or playful elements can provide a breath of fresh air, also because citizens' cognitive processing capacity to process even more corona-specific information becomes saturated.

Do you use **recognizable imagery**?

An image as a "brand" that is consistently disseminated says much more than words. If a metaphor is apt, the population feels understood. The image of a collective marathon or a "green Christmas" as a target is recognizable, with similarities and differences helping to inform the population.

Do you **validate** the effort of the population?

Positive feedback has a motivating effect. The confidence of the population grows that together we can handle this crisis. Make a direct link between the efforts of the population and concrete results and visualize this.

Guiding	Do you provide an end goal and intermediate goals ?	It is crucial to formulate an end goal and specific and achievable intermediate goals. A common goal has a binding effect. If the population achieves an intermediate goal, it provides a motivational boost.
	Do you share inspiring examples of (role) models ?	Sharing examples of good practice acts as a model for citizens to mirror. If these are shown by role models with whom one has a strong connection, they are even more convincing. Thus, desired behavior can become a "contagious" norm that spreads throughout society.
	Do you exude confidence and a message of hope ?	It is crucial that the public has the belief that their efforts will produce results. Communicating such positive expectations give citizens hope and confidence to take control of the crisis together.
	Do you provide concrete and clear guidelines ?	Formulate very concrete expectations when implementing measures (e.g., via infographics, roadmap, or tutorial). The clearer, the more likely the population will comply.

Clarifying

Do you communicate at **set times**?

Provide a set communication time. This provides a foothold and a piece of control.

Are you creating **predictability**?

Try to provide an overview of the expected evolutions in the short and long term so that the population gets perspective.

Do you communicate **in unison**?

Unity makes power. By communicating in unison as a government and pulling on the same sail, the population can emulate this. Unanimity also means repeating the same basic message, both in terms of terminology and packaging (e.g. visuals).

Are you putting too **much pressure** on the population?

Try to be reasonable in the demands you keep making. If the population becomes agitated, they will go into resistance and there is little chance that they will persevere. Therefore, substantiate difficult measures well.

Demanding	Do you communicate in a compelling way ?	Try to pay attention to your use of language. Words such as "must," "hear," or "require" evoke must-ivation (e.g., "you must persevere"). Replace these with inviting but non-obligatory language, such as 'ask' or 'want' (e.g. 'we are asking everyone to persevere').
Domineering	Are you capitalizing on fear in the population?	Fear is not a good advisor. Painting a doomsday picture and inducing fear may incite momentary action, but is accompanied by <i>collateral damage</i> and denial of the risk. The population becomes more insecure and more prone to anxiety and depression.
	Are you talking the population into guilt ?	Incentivizing the population does not mean that we have to empower them in a debt-laden way. If you instill a sense of guilt in the population, this may work temporarily but it does not constitute a sustainable solution.
Abandoning	Are you sending out negative signals yourself?	However difficult, it is crucial that scientists and the government continue to lead by example. Any signal of desperation has a contagious effect on the population. At the same time, this does not mean that we need to make the population blasé. This will be punctured anyway.

Awaiting

Do you adopt a wait-and-see attitude or do you communicate **proactively**?

Act preventively by intervening in time rather than waiting to take harsher measures to have to control the blazing fire.