

**Table 2. Key themes, subthemes and illustrative quotes.**

Theme	Subtheme	Illustrative quote ( Interview source)
Task 1: Sense-making	Expect the avalanche	<i>“While instant messaging and social media is useful for information, for quick collective decision, it has its dangers of information overload for the recipient and the leader.”</i> (I23)
	Triangulate and verify	<i>“So it does involve a bit of snooping, so I spend some effort asking around to make sure that I get my facts right.”</i> (I17)
	Distil and summarise	<i>“Condensing and interpreting. Condensing, summarising...condensing. Analyse, summarise in condensed form. Then you craft the message.”</i> (I05)
	Collective and individual	<i>“Then we give them feedback that, ‘No I think maybe we should craft it this way because the concerns on the ground or our limitations or what restricts us would be these.’ So, I am feeding information from down up.”</i> (I10)
Task 2: Decision-making	Concentrate on the strategic	<i>“One of the weekends, I had this long TigerConnect chat with ID people and Division Chair because we found that half can present with GI symptoms...we can bounce ideas off and they can reassure us that the risk is low. This is how we started donning N95, PPE for scopes.”</i> (I13)
	Facilitate adaptation	<i>“There is fatigue setting in... So, to me now, it’s probably shifting the focus more to how to sustain the workflow, how to maintain morale.”</i> (I21)
	Orchestrate vertical and horizontal	<i>“With COVID, I formed this operations group involving manpower of certain groups: the</i>

	coordination	<i>consultant manpower, the medical officer manpower, the chief resident, the in-charge of various groups, and my ops (manager)."</i> (I20)
	Fire a warning shot	<i>"Then I have another chat group that is just the heads, for more sensitive things, like 'Your leave's going to be cancelled.' I had to communicate that a few days before it was formally announced. I told them, 'You cannot let leave be approved. But you can't say it yet, so please do it wisely.'"</i> (I23)
	Switch platforms	<i>"As Head, I am careful because this is still a social platform. If there's something that is confidential, I would not put it on WhatsApp. I will need to talk to the person."</i> (I09) <i>"When you need to do some probing, or you don't even know what to ask – in a face-to-face meeting, information sharing is more candid and more open."</i> (I19) <i>"You need to create a shared mental model. If you think that people have different ideas of the intent and what we need to do, you'd better meet."</i> (I10)
Task 3: Meaning- making	Get the narrative right the first time	<i>"There is no opportunity - before the Head of Department could explain the leave cancellation policy, people were already comparing with doctors from another (hospital) group who went skiing."</i> (I10) <i>"Firstly, we weren't sure what was the greater message...we weren't sure of what's going on, therefore we felt ok, let's wait, but then in the</i>

		<p><i>waiting, I think we didn't communicate."</i></p> <p>(106)</p> <p><i>"...if there is something that you are supposed to say and you don't say (it) and there is a gap, that gap would be filled with rubbish or fake news"</i></p> <p>(110)</p>
	Harness the goodwill but take it with a pinch of salt	<p><i>"...if we have such a quick outpouring of support, does it also die out faster? (Now) in the second month, I think the enthusiasm has already started to flag. So, I'm sceptical."</i></p> <p>(122)</p>
	A battle for hearts and minds	<p><i>"When my staff went into the outbreak wards, I sent a sentence, 'Take care, stay safe.'-- then everybody sends to the same person, to take care, and that person feels the support from the entire team, especially when you are not supposed to meet, but (they feel) the warmth and support that comes through the WhatsApp."</i></p> <p>(109)</p> <p><i>"The entire battle is lost when they don't have confidence – confidence in themselves to do the work, confidence that their Head knows what they're talking about, confidence that the hospital is doing the right thing. And that part is emotional, not entirely intellectual -- and that's the part that I find the hardest. What WhatsApp cannot communicate, is the feeling."</i></p> <p>(123)</p>
	Nuancing the narratives	<p><i>"For the seniors, we are mature enough to handle disagreements...but if you are junior you might say, 'How did they have such disparate opinions, and not reconcile them? First of all, information-wise, who should I believe? And two: are they really fighting?"</i></p> <p>(114)</p>

	Don't keep quiet	<p><i>"Sometimes the key decision leaders/makers in these groups need to say something. If the boss keeps quiet, and allows the rest of us go on, I have this nagging fear that we're just doing our own thing and he's silently endorsing it, or he doesn't know what's going on."</i></p> <p>(I23)</p>
The Central Task: Learning	Pace yourself	<p><i>"Initially I wasn't sleeping well because information flow was non-stop. Always worried about missing out – FOMO (Fear of missing out) - because there were a lot of sudden decisions. I still remember receiving a text at 3 am because one of the medical officers was suspected to be infected - something quite urgent. Sometimes I wake up for no reason to check my phone."</i></p> <p>I21</p>
	Keep the morale up	<p><i>"At critical points, your presence as a leader is important. People look to you not just as a source of information, but also as a source of confidence, because they look at you and they understand – okay, I think he knows what he's talking about."</i></p> <p>I23</p>
	Look for clinical pearls	<p><i>"We learnt something very important: there were some people who were never positive! We kept swabbing (because) the clinical picture was so suggestive. After a while we realised: if the clinical picture is very suggestive, we really have to mentally treat them as COVID, and then one fine day the swab will become positive."</i></p> <p>I19</p>
	Share best practices	<p><i>"...because we put everybody on the (chat) group, we saw certain patterns, and we update the (management) protocols ...compared to last time, now, you can inform and advise your</i></p>

		<i>colleagues in the other hospitals and all the positive practices then become promulgated.”</i> 117
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