

Women and Leadership in The Time Of Coronavirus

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Abstract

This paper attempts to explore the correlation between gender and crisis leadership in the context of the fight against coronavirus raging through the world in 202-21. It has been observed that wherever alpha male leadership was displayed, the effects have been catastrophic in dealing with the pandemic. In sharp contrast the women leaders have led their countries well through this public health crisis. The paper will attempt to understand what factors went into this successful handling of a black swan event.

Key Words: Women, Leadership, Gender, COVID 19

Introduction

Nothing tests a leader like a crisis. There is an element of the leader's deepest character that is revealed during highly charged, dramatic events. A crisis can quickly expose a leader's hidden strengths and core weaknesses. It can show the world if the leader has what it takes to function effectively when the heat is on. Will the leader address the crisis head-on, take those actions needed to fix it, and, if appropriate, take responsibility for the crisis? Will the leader freeze, or worse, claim to be a victim and pass off the responsibility to others? What can and should a leader do to find out what went wrong and to ensure it doesn't happen again?

In December 2019 Chinese public health officials informed the World Health Organisation that an unknown new virus was causing pneumonia-like symptoms in Wuhan. WHO named it COVID 19. On January 30th WHO declared a global public health emergency. By March 11th it had declared the Corona virus a pandemic.

In the face of this unprecedented crisis global leaders were called forth to display exemplary leadership skills. In times of panic and anxiety, people look towards their leaders for answers. A range of emotions are unleashed by a crisis including grief, rage, revenge, loneliness, sadness, repulsion, vigilance, anguish, and guilt. It is in this chaotic, ambiguous, and highly charged emotional environment—one rife with the human element—that leaders must lead, and lead well. The word "crisis" itself originates from the Greek 'krisis', which means "to sift or separate." A crisis has the potential to divorce the past from the future, to replace security with insecurity, or to swap routine for creativity and move a nation or a people from trauma to transformation. Crisis is emotional chaos. Seeger et al. defined crisis as a specific, unexpected and non-routine event or series of events that create high levels of uncertainty and threaten or are perceived to threaten an organization's high priority goals, a time notable for its confusion, surprise, shock, and stress.

What commentators noticed was that countries that had alpha male leadership foundered when it came to tackling COVID 19. The most public and humiliating bungling of the crisis was displayed by President Trump. By Election Day 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic had killed 234,244 Americans and caused the sharpest macroeconomic downturn in US history. If the pandemic had not occurred Trump might have become president for a second term.

In contrast countries led by women, countries like Taiwan and New Zealand, showed better coping skills and took firm and decisive action. New Zealand's Jacinda Arden won international plaudits for her effective handling of the virus which saw very few deaths and infections. In contrast to Trump she triumphed over the COVID leadership stress test and was re-elected. Taiwan has also navigated the Coronavirus crisis quite admirably. An early mask mandate, social isolation, quarantine facilities and leadership accountability have helped Taiwan under the leadership of Tsai Ing-wen

Crisis Leadership

The five critical components of leadership during times of crises involve the following processes: Sense-making: Attempting to understand the crisis as it unravels. It involves understanding and addressing barriers to recognition of the crisis, organizational limitations, and evaluating the psychological dimensions of sense-making, including issues related to stress, performance, and reality testing. Karl Weick, the “father of sense making,” suggested that the term meant simply “the making of sense”. It is the process of “structuring the unknown” by “placing stimuli into some kind of framework” that enables us “to comprehend, understand, explain, attribute, extrapolate, and predict”

Decision making involves evaluating alternatives and making critical choices, building teams and implementation with crisis coordination, and putting crisis leadership in place. Meaning-making refers to “crisis management as political communication”—the actions of communicating crisis to the population within and outside the country, while maintaining credibility. This moves leadership away from its connotations of dominance. Leadership becomes a shared search and construction of meaning.

Crisis termination refers to how the crisis ends, which may consist of blame games, actions, and the challenges of accountability at the end of the crisis.

Learning refers to actions and reforms that result from analysis and learning from the crisis to strengthen organizations and systems.

In an article entitled “The secret weapon in the fight against coronavirus: women” –[Arwa Mahdawi](#), asks: “What do Germany, Taiwan and [New Zealand](#) have in common?”

Her answer is that they've all got female leaders and are doing an exceptional job in their response to the coronavirus crisis. The Coronavirus pandemic has proved to be the ultimate Black swan event. A black swan refers to an event which lies outside the realm of regular expectations because nothing in the past could help predict its possibility. The event has an extreme impact and a retrospective predictability. The combination of low predictability and great impact make black

swan moments difficult to deal with. Such moments call for leaders who are open, and are comfortable negotiating their way through ambiguities. The key crisis leadership skills involve sense-making, decision making, meaning-making, crisis termination, and learning. these terms are explained below:

Sense-making, the first task of any crisis, involves attempting to understand the crisis as it unravels. It involves understanding and addressing barriers to recognition of the crisis, organizational limitations, and evaluating the psychological dimensions of sense-making, including issues related to stress, performance, and reality testing. Decision making includes evaluating alternatives and making critical choices, building teams and implementation with crisis coordination, and putting crisis leadership in place. Meaning-making refers to “crisis management as political communication”—the actions of communicating to the population within and outside the country, while maintaining credibility. Crisis termination essentially refers to how the crisis ends, which may consist of blame games, actions, and the challenges of accountability at the end of the crisis. Learning refers to actions and reforms that result from analysis and learning from the crisis to strengthen organizations and systems.”

For far too long the Great Man theory of leadership has dominated leadership studies. The 19th century historian Thomas Carlyle was most closely associated with this theory. He believed the history of nations was the biography of its great men. Leaders were born not made. History was seen as the story of great men and their impact on society. The paternalistic tenor of leadership meant that women were considered unfit to lead. This, unfortunately, despite all the advances made by feminism, still seems to be a prevalent view in world politics.

The Coronavirus has disrupted this assumption. The pandemic has not been equally catastrophic for all countries. In Germany, Finland, New Zealand, Denmark, Norway and Taiwan, elected female leaders have somehow managed to mitigate the catastrophic effects of the virus on populations. In an article entitled “In the world’s fight against coronavirus, female leaders show the way” Ayush Tiwari offers an account of the ways in which women leaders have played an exemplary role in the fight against coronavirus. While Germany does have a large number of cases, it’s robust health care system and stringent testing has meant an impressively low mortality rate. Other countries like Taiwan, Finland, New Zealand etc have seen leaders taking firm, quick and decisive steps in handling the pandemic.

What accounts for the success of women in Coronavirus crisis leadership context? A heightened alertness to the danger and clear, consistent communication strategies lie at the heart of their success. Their countries trust them. In an article entitled ‘NZ’s Ardern basks in a winning Covid-19 response’ , John McBeth writes: Articulate, calm, compassionate, purposeful, open, bold, decisive, self-deprecating. That head-long dive into the Thesaurus of laudatory terms is often followed with glowing expressions such as “steely resolve,” “skilled communicator” and a “masterclass in crisis.” These terms could well be used for all the female leaders of nations discussed in this paper.

Gender And Crisis Leadership

In order to understand why gender has played an important role in the COVID leadership scenario, we turn to an understanding of what the role of a leader is during times of change and uncertainty. The leader embodies a vision that is shared by the followers. While Jacinda Arden stands for possibilities and opportunities, Tsai's election slogan was "Resist China, Defend Taiwan.". Iceland's Katrin Jakobsdottir is clearly associated with a Left- Green agenda. The clear articulation of values is thus one manifestation of their exemplary leadership.

What is even more interesting is how quietly and effectively these women have challenged societal mores. Jacinda Arden is an unmarried mother who gave birth to her daughter while in office. Taiwan's Tsai-Ing-wen is a single woman who is constantly trolled for her singleness and childlessness. It was during her stewardship that Taiwan became the first Asian country to legalise same sex marriage. Finland's Sanna Marin grew up in a rainbow family with two lesbian mothers. This unconventional upbringing has given her a fresh perspective on issues of equality. Mette Frederiksen is a divorcee. The point that I am trying to make is that these women have challenged and questioned societal expectations and stereotypes. They have had to chart their own way forward, without certainties. This makes them particularly effective in the time of crisis as they rely on their own deep understanding of what the situation demands rather than any external authoritative dictate.

Leadership Styles

These women leaders have primarily displayed two distinctive styles of leadership: adaptive and transformational. These are discussed briefly below:

ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP: Adaptive leadership is the practice of mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges and thrive. This definition is derived from *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organisation and the World*. The practice of leadership involves diagnosis and action. The first stage involves data collection and problem identification. Next is the interpretive stage. This leads to potential approaches to action as a series of interventions in the community or organization. The problem solving process is iterative and moves back and forth through data collection, interpretation and action. What the Coronavirus challenge has also shown us is that many times what stops leaders from addressing an issue that demands adaptive change is their unwillingness to displease their followers. President Trump dismissed the coronavirus as a hoax perpetrated by the democrats. Adaptive leadership risks telling people what they need to hear rather than what they want to hear. During times of uncertainty leaders are expected to provide direction, protection and order.

The pandemic has created a new disquieting disequilibrium. Nobody quite knows what the future holds. Leaders will have to learn to deal with swirling masses of energy unleashed by emotions such as frustration, panic, confusion and anxiety. Flexibility and openness are essential traits for the adaptive leader.

The women leaders discussed in this paper have displayed elements of adaptive leadership. They have responded to the pandemic as it developed and taken relevant steps and measures. In contrast are leaders like Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro who dismissed coronavirus as a little flu.

Transformative Leadership

Transformational leadership inspires followers to extraordinary outcomes and develops their own leadership capacity in the process. Transformational leaders are inspirational and serve as role models for their followers.

“These leaders are creative, innovative, and are very open to new ideas. They tend to be tolerant of their followers' mistakes, and even encourage them as they believe they promote growth and improvement within the organization. These leaders create learning opportunities for their followers and abandon obsolete practices.” Transformational leaders define public values that embrace the supreme and enduring principles of a people. Descriptions of the components of transformational leadership are as described below:

Idealised Influence: Transformational leaders are admired, trusted and respected. Followers believe that their leaders are endowed with extraordinary capabilities, persistence and determination. Thus there are two components of idealised influence

- The leader's own behavior
- Perception of the capabilities and character of the leader.

Transformational leaders who wield idealized influence normally demonstrate high standards of moral and ethical conduct.

Inspirational Motivation

Transformational leaders behave in ways that motivate and inspire those around them. They provide meaning and challenge to the work of their followers. The leader offers a compelling vision of the future and demonstrates commitment to shared goals.

Leadership and COVID 19

The Coronavirus is a new form of virus and nobody can really predict or anticipate how it will evolve or the damage that it will do. Three factors could determine how much the virus spread:

1. Population Density
2. Exposure to foreign travelers.
3. How soon the country was shut down.

The first two factors could not be controlled but “Cities, states and countries that implemented a clear, thorough and well-executed social distance plan at least a week before their first death had radically different outcomes. In short, they flattened the curve and controlled and prevented new cases.”

Countries headed by women acted first and made the bold and unpopular decision to shut down the nation in the face of the invisible enemy. What accounts for their effectiveness and decisiveness. The rest of this paper will attempt to answer this question.

Leadership in Practice

The 41-year-young Mette Frederiksen became the youngest Prime Minister of Denmark when she assumed office on 27th of June 2019. She declared herself as a ‘children’s prime minister’, keeping children at the heart of her policy.

COVID-19 saw her act at her most decisive. She was accused of over reaction when she shut down the borders and locked down her country. As it turned out, she was out ahead of many other countries in Europe, which generally adopted similar measures after delays of days or weeks. Denmark under Mette will also be an early mover when it comes to relaxing the lockdown. In addition to this the Danish government has agreed to cover 75 per of the cost of employees’ salaries as long as companies don’t let people go. This applies to those companies that are experiencing a decline in orders and as a consequence would be forced to lay off employees.

It is this emphasis on well-being that seems to define female leadership. New Zealand’s Prime Minister Jacinda Arden unveiled the world’s first well-being budget in 2019. Mental health became the national agenda. Child well-being and measures against family violence also were highlighted. Arden says: “When our children do better, we all do better.” Arden’s electoral platform was built on kindness, acceptance and inclusion. She gained the world’s attention in the aftermath of the Christchurch shooting when she declared of the Muslims in her country “they are us”. The way she addressed the nation and her refusal to telegraph aggression or play on anxieties won her widespread respect. At the same time she moved decisively to pass meaningful gun legislation. Her willingness to initiate difficult conversations led to collaboration between technology giants and governments to ensure that extremist acts would not be live streamed and toxic material would be taken down. Arden has granted her country much visibility on the International stage and graced the March 2020 cover of Time magazine.

Among the first and the fastest to respond to the Coronavirus crisis was Tsai Ing-wen of Taiwan. “Back in January, at the first sign of a new illness, she introduced 124 measures to block the spread, without having to resort to the lockdowns that have become common elsewhere. She earned good will by sending 10 million face masks to the US and Europe. Ing-wen managed what CNN has called “among the world’s best” responses, keeping the epidemic under control, still reporting very few deaths.

Katrín Jakobsdóttir, Iceland’s Prime Minister, initiated early detection and contact tracing and social distancing measures to deal with the pandemic. A poll had declared her one of the most trusted politicians in Iceland. Iceland is offering free coronavirus testing for all its citizens and has already tested almost five percent of its population. Finland’s Sanna Marin became the world’s youngest Prime Minister at 34. Her forte is policies and issues and climate change, equality and social welfare represent her main priorities. Finland is the only country to have mobilized social media influencers as critical operators during the pandemic crisis. “We are aware that government communication doesn’t reach everyone. Before this was possible through traditional media like television, but today especially young people get their news through social media,” said Aapo

Riihimäki, a communications specialist at the Finnish prime minister's office." This acceptance of social media influence may be traced to the Finnish PM's millennial identity.

Norway's Erna Solberg has shown particular interest in gender issues, such as girl's rights and education. The Nordic country invoked emergency powers to deal with the pandemic. Solberg organized a news conference at her office to deal with questions raised by children. "It is OK to be scared when so many things happen at the same time." In Germany, Angela Merkel's calm leadership during a global crisis has won her much respect and admiration. In her first television address to the nation (besides the annual New Year's message) Merkel said "This is serious — take it seriously," she told her compatriots. "Since German unification — no, since World War II — there has been no challenge to our country in which our acting together in solidarity matters so much." Merkel has announced a huge government relief package to cushion the blow of the crisis to business. The massive aid package and efficient handling of the Coronavirus pandemic has bolstered Merkel's image as a calm and caring leader.

In an article entitled "What Do Countries With The Best Coronavirus Responses Have In Common? Women Leaders" Avivah Wittenberg-Cox comments:

"Generally, the empathy and care which all of these female leaders have communicated seems to come from an alternate universe than the one we have gotten used to. It's like their arms are coming out of their videos to hold you close in a heart-felt and loving embrace. Who knew leaders could sound like this? Now we do.

Now, compare these leaders and stories with the hero and blame narratives unleashed by male leaders.

Women and Power

In an earlier research project I had sought to explore the ways in which women acquire and use power. Though it is recognized that women exert power in multiple spheres, my area of interest was in women in the public sphere. Power was defined as decision making and the ability to create change in the public realm. The world of work and of politics is structured according to male norms. Women who succeed have to work doubly hard. This insight is strengthened by the fact that none of the women leaders studied in this paper inherited their power. They rose through the ranks on their own merit. It was stipulated that because women have traditionally been occupied with care giving, their way of exerting power might reject command-obey notions of power and seek a more compassionate approach. Instead of domination of others, some women leaders may be drawn to the process of empowerment of others. Communication was seen as a twenty first century skill for leading and managing. It is significant that Jacinda Arden, Prime Minister of New Zealand, graduated in Communication and Public Relations.

All the women leaders studied in this paper have displayed remarkable communication skills. They have been able to articulate their vision with clarity and rally support. The pandemic has seen the need for the leaders to address the public in their speeches. Angela Merkel's speech is a good example of the way women communicate. She keeps emphasizing the importance of care

and community. Like a teacher, she clearly enunciates what the crisis is and what is required of the citizens of Germany. It is not an authoritative speech. It displays vulnerability and openness. It acknowledges the bewilderment and sense of loss of the audience and asserts that together they can overcome the crisis. Angela Merkel has never been identified as a charismatic leader. It is her authenticity as a leader and as a speaker that have catapulted her to the position of the most powerful woman in the world. Merkel's lack of vanity and non-pretentiousness stands out in contrast to the macho politics that wrought havoc in German history. Her political career has been built on her ability to listen and to empathize. In 2021 when she steps down from a long stint as chancellor of the nation, she will have transformed German politics completely and quietly. This generation of women leaders has worked their way up the political ladder holding various posts in local and national government. They tend to be serious policy enthusiasts. Their cool, analytical approach to the crisis and refusal to succumb to macho politics has proved to be strengths in these trying times.

Conclusion

A generation of women leaders has staked its claim to greatness during these times of the Coronavirus pandemic. They have displayed a willingness to listen to expert advice and an ability to unleash collective potential. While their other-centeredness and community mindedness have made them willing to step centre stage and act on behalf of their people, it is their decisiveness and ability to take risks that have proved truly incredible. Their stories need to be told-in their own voices and on their own terms. There is much to learn from their successes and their failures. No doubt these women will prove inspirational to the next generation of women leaders. Their power draws upon their critical strategic abilities and competencies and the skills that they have developed so assiduously. These have been tested during this dark period. While earlier epochs recognized violence or wealth as power, the twenty first century is increasingly accepting knowledge as power. This includes knowledge of the self, as well as rational knowledge. What the female leaders of today are demonstrating is a higher form of knowledge based on care and compassion. They display humility and devotion to the welfare of human beings. In the final analysis this may be a more lasting form of power than any other manifestation of it that we have seen in human history.

As Cami Anderson concludes in her article "Why Do Women Make Such Good Leaders During COVID-19?":

"The story of the spread and unthinkable human tragedies of COVID-19 is the ultimate case study in high-stakes leadership. I don't think any of us can afford to miss the lessons here. All leaders, including men, can learn from what we have seen women do in this crisis.

And, anyone in a position to rethink the majority male C-suites and board rooms in their organization should reflect. We think of gender diversity as being about representation, but COVID-19 shows us it is about high-quality, life-saving leadership.

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