

## Leadership in a Time of Global Crisis: Who Plays a Role?

22 December 2020



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History reminds us that when a crisis strikes; whether it's times of war, famine, natural disasters, or pandemics – people look towards the horizon for a captain who will steady the helm and lead them through the rough times.

In what has been dubbed a [year like no other year](#) in our lifetime, no thanks to COVID-19, we have truly seen how [leadership is indeed forged in crisis](#). Characterised by radical uncertainty, the current global pandemic has been identified as one of the ["defining policy challenges of an era"](#). Yet, at the same time, this also reinforces the importance of both State actors and indeed the State itself – which parallels the importance of both organisational actors and organisations, in the response to the challenges brought forth by the pandemic. What are their roles and responsibilities in times like these?

First, let's take a look at the State actors. For the longest of times, we have looked to our public servants as beacons for guidance. Boin and t'Hart ([2003](#), p.544) posited that "crisis and leadership are closely intertwined phenomena", and that there is a natural inclination on our behalf to look to our leaders to do something. At the initial stages of Australia's COVID-19 response, and quite literally hot off the aftermath of the devastating bushfires, my colleagues and I reflected on how [the crisis had refined Scott Morrison's leadership](#) as he changed his public engagement tact and engaged with compassion. Across the Tasman, we also saw how [Jacinda Ardern's great public engagement](#) translated into effective crisis leadership – or at least, the perception of it.

This is a story as old as time itself, that like beauty, leadership is in the eyes of the beholder. This is explained by [leader categorization theory](#), where followers develop mental images (also called *implicit theories*) of their own perceived ideal leader (also called *leader prototypes*) based on their experiences. In turn, prior research also indicates that people are more likely to highly rate the effectiveness of leaders who closely match their [personal prototypes](#).

One example is the revered Franklin Delano Roosevelt, rated as one of America's greatest president. From his [inauguration](#) during the worst economic crisis in history – the Great Depression, to the tail end of World War II; Roosevelt was able to continuously capture and engage the nation's imagination through his leadership; leading to him being the only president who served across four terms in America's history. Despite

being a paraplegic, [Roosevelt thoroughly occupied the imagination of the American people](#) by speaking directly to them using the then-new medium of radio.

Dubbed the "[fireside chats](#)", Roosevelt's well-crafted, yet personal, informational, and conversational tone captured the country's hearts and imaginations. He affectionately utilized the greeting "my friends..." and invoked the memories of past inspirational figures like Abraham Lincoln. His intent was clear – as he worked closely with his speechwriters and putting on his own personal touches into his public addresses. Put it simply, Roosevelt understood that leadership is in the eyes of the beholder, and that by capturing the very heart and mind of the beholder – he will be able to lead better and obtain better outcomes.

From then on, the masterclass continues. From John F Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr, George Bush, to Barrack Obama; effective public leaders embody that beacon that serves as guidance for the public in times of crisis. Their role is to lead, and their responsibility is to inspire people to engage in action in response to the crisis.

Second, what about the State itself? As the rest of 2020 unfolded, it became clear that the [role of government need to evolve](#) in response to the pandemic. With skyrocketing infection and death rates, governments across the world scrambled to enact policy to safeguard its citizen – from border controls, lockdowns, social distancing, to Orwellian-like tracking and tracing of movements. Some argue that the [State has now too much power](#) while others argue that civil liberties are [a necessary sacrifice](#) in a bid for us to contain the spread of COVID-19.

Irrespective of where one may stand in the continuum, [scholars do argue](#) that the State plays an important role in designing and evaluating policy to address and contain the trail of destruction that the COVID-19 storm continues to brew. [Well-considered policies](#), while never perfect, can make a significant impact on not just the health and wellbeing of citizens, but also has long-reaching economic implications.

We know that [nations with better governance](#) do a better job at minimizing both infection and death rates related with COVID-19, and hence it is crucial for the State to build organizational capacity by equipping and empowering the public service, as well as maintaining a strong administrative outlook. Times of crisis not only magnifies the flaws inherent in the decisions made as evident from the "[botched response in the USA](#)", to poor administrative decisions leading to [long lockdowns in Victoria, Australia](#); but it can also amplify good governance as demonstrated by the lightning pace at which the South Australian government responded to the November "Parafield Cluster" outbreak.

However, one thing is clear – while policy and governance are key roles and responsibilities of the State, these are simply not enough in times of crisis. Take the well-designed, and well-policed (to an extent) social distancing that's been adopted from suburban Australia through to the smallest country towns in [Alaska](#). Its effectiveness can only be as good as its compliance rate, and recent research by [Pederson and Favero \(2020\)](#) and [Dai and colleagues \(2020\)](#) indicate that this is highly dependent on the effectiveness of the State actor in communicating as well as presenting reliable, timely, and persuasive public information.

No matter how good the policies and governance approaches; without good and strong leadership – they will have no impact. They are important because they are like the rudder and propeller in any ship. Yet, without the captain, the sailors would sail aimlessly in the sea.

Likewise, in times of crisis, the most important role and responsibility is for the State actor to inspire and to lead. To capture the heart and imagination of the beholders, and in turn, steady the helm and lead them through the rough times.



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