

Pandemic leadership: Lessons from New Zealand's approach to COVID-19

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Abstract

This case study analyses the leadership approach and practices of the New Zealand government, led by Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, in the response thus far to the COVID-19 pandemic. It reports on how a shared sense of purpose has been established, that of minimizing harm to lives and livelihoods, for which the government has sought – and secured – New Zealanders' commitment. Key leadership practices comprise the government's willingness to themselves be led by expertise, its efforts to mobilise the population, and to enable coping, all of which serve to build the trust in leadership needed for transformative, collective action such as the pandemic demands. At the time of writing, New Zealand appears well on track to achieve its ambitious goal of achieving rapid and complete control over the COVID-19 outbreak – not just 'flattening the curve' as other countries are struggling to do – at least in part due to these leadership contributions. A framework of good practices for pandemic leadership is offered drawn from this case study, in the hope transferable lessons can be taken to aid others in the continuing struggle to limit the harm COVID-19 poses to lives and livelihoods throughout the world.

Keywords

COVID-19, leadership, New Zealand government, Jacinda Ardern, leadership practices

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Introduction: Yes, leadership matters

As a critically oriented leadership scholar, I have long had a somewhat ambivalent relationship with my object of analysis. On the one hand, I'm generally both wary – and weary – of heroic narratives which attribute exceptional outcomes to the will and skill of individual heads of state or CEOs while ignoring the swathe of other contributors and contextual factors that are routinely at play when something difficult to achieve is accomplished. And, on the other hand, I am also much influenced by both research and personal experience that indicates poor leadership is both woefully commonplace and very harmful and that, in contrast, good leadership can indeed make a real difference to both organisations and societies.

The potentially life-altering consequences of good or poor leadership have, for many of us, likely never been quite so starkly apparent than at present. Evidence grows on a daily basis that the acts or omissions of some political or business leaders have contributed to the virus's spread, resulting in mass fatalities which could have been avoided had these leaders followed the advice of scientists (see, for example, Telford and Kindy, 2020; Walker, 2020; Winfield, 2020). US President Donald Trump, unsurprisingly, continues almost daily to set new lows for reckless incompetence amongst world leaders (see Ladkin, this issue, also Lipton et al., 2020). But, sadly, he is not alone in failing to act as a responsible leader should. Severe missteps have also been reported in the approaches taken by Boris Johnson in the UK (Walker, 2020), Shinzo Abe in Japan (Mason, 2020), Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil (Phillips, 2020), amongst others.

Watching all this from my home in New Zealand, where respect for science, facts and evidence, where calm but potent efforts to mobilise collective adherence to safety measures, and where a suite of efforts to aid in coping with the effects of the pandemic have all been such prominent aspects of our government's response, the gap between good and bad leadership is something I experience viscerally. In this context, leadership scholars have a useful role to play in both exposing bad leadership and highlighting good leadership and I'm therefore grateful to be given the opportunity to contribute to this Special Issue. In what follows, I first provide readers with a brief overview of New Zealand's approach thus far before considering the results to date in terms of public health and support. I then turn to analyse the leadership aspects of that response, offering a framework of the key practices that the case of New Zealand seems to indicate can be helpful for leadership in a pandemic context.

New Zealand's approach to COVID-19 thus far

The New Zealand government's response to managing the public health aspects of COVID-19 has moved through a series of phases, although adopting a 'precautionary approach' that is informed by 'the best available science and health advice' (Clark, 2020a) has been consistently emphasised. Many aspects of its approach are broadly consistent with a pre-existing Influenza Pandemic Plan which sets out the following phases: plan for it; keep it out; stamp it out; manage it; manage it post peak; recover from it (Ministry of Health, 2017). Consequently, preventing COVID-19's entry through increasingly extensive border restrictions, along with heightened preparation for a possible outbreak, marked the initial approach (Clark, 2020b). Flights from China were banned on February 3, immediately after the World Health Organization (WHO) confirmed the first death outside China and then

from Iran on February 28, the same day New Zealand reported its first case. For context, Italy had 888 cases at that time, according to the BBC's pandemic tracker (see, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-51235105>). Efforts then continued to 'stamp it out', however with case numbers rising from early March emphasis shifted to the 'flatten the curve' approach, to avoid health systems being overrun, that is still in use by most other countries (Wiles and Morris, 2020).

On 14 March, when New Zealand had just six cases, the Prime Minister announced further border restrictions, mandatory self-isolation for those entering the country and foreshadowed upcoming economic support measures and policies regarding mass gatherings. The overall stated intention was that New Zealand intended to 'go hard, and go early' in its response to the pandemic, guided by a strategy that sought to 'flatten the curve' (Ardern, 2020a). From early March, however, Otago University public health professors Michael Baker and Nick Wilson had been intensively lobbying the government to urgently adopt a more aggressive and ambitious approach than just 'flattening the curve', aiming to position New Zealand to achieve eradication of the virus within its borders (e.g. Baker and Wilson, 2020).¹ This, they argued, was needed because the standard WHO-informed influenza pandemic plan was not suitable given COVID-19's longer incubation period, which greatly increases the potential for transmission by those who are infected but asymptomatic, meaning this particular virus can spread far more rapidly and extensively than influenza and thus poses a greater risk to health systems becoming overwhelmed.

On Saturday March 21, Ardern announced a new four level 'Alert System', which reportage indicates she personally initiated (Trevatt, 2020), which sets out what response measures apply depending on the extent of the virus's presence in New Zealand (Ardern, 2020b). Briefly, Alert Level 1 – 'Prepare' – pertains to when COVID19 is contained domestically but is uncontrolled elsewhere; Alert Level 2 – 'Reduce' – means while contained in New Zealand, the risk of community transmission exists; Alert Level 3 – 'Restrict' – means there is a high risk the disease is not contained domestically; and Alert Level 4 – 'Lockdown' – means it is likely the disease is not contained domestically. Each step up in Alert Level is associated with increasingly tight restrictions in both international and domestic movement, social contact and economic activity (see <https://covid19.govt.nz/alert-system/covid-19-alert-system/#covid-19-alert-system>).

In announcing the framework, Ardern placed New Zealand at Alert Level 2 and advised the country to prepare for the possibility that could change quickly. Over the balance of the weekend she gained support behind the scenes from influential business leaders for the government's inclination to move quickly to Level 4 (Stock, 2020; Trevatt, 2020), while Professor Baker publicly urged for a rapid escalation in response, arguing that New Zealand, as well as every other country, had 'underestimated the intensity of this infection' ('We're underestimating Covid-19', 2020). On Monday March 23, informed also by the latest modelling from other expert advisors about the potential fatalities that could arise if COVID-19 become widespread, Ardern and her Cabinet colleagues decided on an immediate move to Level 3 and thence onwards to Level 4 two days later, triggering a full nationwide lockdown for all but essential services (Ardern, 2020c; Trevatt, 2020). Professor Baker declared he was 'overjoyed' at this decision (Baker, 2020) and influential business leaders likewise endorsed this approach (Stock, 2020). The easing back to Level 3 restrictions occurred nearly five weeks later, on April 28 and is subject to further review on May 11.

COVID-19 cases in New Zealand only began escalating *after* Italy (March 9) and Spain (March 14) had adopted nationwide lockdown measures in a desperate bid to contain their rapidly growing cases and fatalities. The lessons to be had from those countries' experiences were, indeed, heeded: in announcing New Zealand's move to Level 4 on March 23 Ardern said 'We currently have 102 cases. But so did Italy once. Now the virus has overwhelmed their health system and hundreds of people are dying every day' (Ardern, 2020c). For context, that same day, the BBC pandemic tracker (link above) reports 63,927 cases in Italy, 35,136 cases in Spain and 43,863 in the US. The next day Boris Johnson announced the UK's nationwide lockdown, at which point there were 6650 cases ('Strict new curbs on life in UK', 2020). In announcing New Zealand's lockdown Ardern stated the risks plainly, reporting that expert advice and projections now showed that if left unchecked, 'tens of thousands of New Zealanders will die' from COVID-19 (Ardern, 2020c), an alarming prospect in a country of less than 5 million.

There is no denying New Zealand has had some crucial advantages – most especially geographic isolation, low population density, even in its cities, and a later start to its exposure to COVID-19, the latter meaning it could learn from the experience of others. Being an island nation allows it to manage the logistics of strict border controls with relative ease – albeit that the economic impact of imposing such restrictions is daunting, with tourism accounting for around 12.5% of the workforce and 6% of GDP (Tourism New Zealand, 2019). Yet even granting how valuable these advantages have been, it is also clear other leaders squandered their own opportunities to build a coherent response for many weeks, resulting in tens of thousands of avoidable deaths. In New Zealand, planning for a possible outbreak began intensively on January 24, 2 days after the WHO reported evidence of human-to-human transmission in Wuhan (WHO, 2020). New Zealand's Ministry of Health (MoH) established an incident management team and advised the public that while 'the risk to New Zealand is currently assessed as low, the Ministry is taking this outbreak very seriously' (Ministry of Health, 2020).

Results to date

As at 30 April 2020, 3 days after the move back to Alert Level 3, New Zealand's 'deaths per one million of population' from COVID-19 is just under four people (www.statista.com, 2020). New Zealand, with a population of 4.8 million, had a total of 1476 cases and 19 deaths as at 30 April (<https://epidemic-stats.com/coronavirus/new-zealand>) while Ireland, with a population of 4.9 million, had 20,253 cases and 1190 deaths (<https://epidemic-stats.com/coronavirus/ireland>). New Zealand's steep decline in new cases after only a very short period of exponential growth (see, for example, <https://www.ft.com/coronavirus-latest>) provides validation for the government's decision in terms of its objective of saving lives and stamping out COVID-19 within our borders.

This outcome from what, at this juncture, may only be the 'first wave' of infection around the globe, stands in sharp relief to what other developed countries have experienced – although that will be of cold comfort to those in New Zealand who have lost those they love to the virus. The 'top 10' in this grim account of suffering is, however, so very much worse: Belgium's rate is 641 dead per million; Spain, 509; Italy, 452; France, 353; the UK, 326; the Netherlands, 264; Ireland, 238; Sweden, 231; Switzerland 199; and the US, 178 (www.statista.com, 2020). Yet, as bad as these results are, they underestimate the true state of affairs for those countries where deaths outside of hospitals are not included in this data

(www.statista.com). While many factors affect a nation's COVID experience, leadership has a role to play in the varying approaches taken and the consequences that flow from those.

It is far too soon to know with confidence how the economic effects of COVID-19 on the New Zealand economy will compare with those of other countries. However, New Zealand's initial lockdown, at just under five weeks, is shorter than that of many other European countries and a number of US states, which coupled with its appearing to have the virus under control and thus far having a much lower number of deaths per million than many others, holds promise that the economic effects could also be less severe than elsewhere.

Overall community endorsement for the New Zealand government's approach thus far is spectacularly high, especially given that while Ardern generally attracts positive press coverage internationally, domestically her government's popularity has never been especially strong: as recently as mid-February an influential poll showed that while Ardern then had the incumbent's advantage as 'preferred Prime Minister', attracting 42% support, the two main opposition parties combined had sufficient support to govern if the poll results were translated into an actual election. In contrast, a Colmar Brunton poll undertaken in early April, just over a week after New Zealand moved into its full nationwide lockdown, showed 88% of respondents believed they could 'trust the government to make the right decisions on Covid-19', compared to an average of 59% of people in G7 countries surveyed in the same poll (Manhire, 2020).

This level of trust in the government's handling of the pandemic is made even more remarkable when other matters are considered. First, as explained earlier, the New Zealand government decided to adopt a strict nationwide lockdown very early in the spread here of COVID-19. Second, the same poll that found 88% trust in the government's response also found 42% of New Zealanders reporting their personal income had already been affected by the pandemic, compared to only 29% of those surveyed in G7 nations (Manhire, 2020). Third, the poll also found 64% of New Zealanders believed a return to normal would take more than 6 months, compared to just 37% holding that same view amongst the G7 (Manhire, 2020). The picture, then, is that New Zealanders supported the move into lockdown without the 'motivation' created by firsthand experience of mass infection and death, and that despite being *more likely* than the G7 average to have been financially affected and also much *less optimistic* than the G7 average about how long recovery will take, still nonetheless evince much greater support for their government's response than do others in G7 countries. Given that leaders play a crucial role in the 'management of meaning' (Smircich and Morgan, 1982), these perceptions of New Zealanders seem likely to be a further indication of effective leadership by Ardern and colleagues.

Pandemic leadership: A framework

Having explained the overall approach taken by the New Zealand government, I turn now to examine the particular leadership practices (Raelin, 2016) that I argue have been instrumental in securing the results achieved to date, both in terms of public health and in garnering New Zealanders' trust in and support for the government's leadership. To do this, I offer the framework below which highlights key elements of the overall leadership approach adopted by Ardern and colleagues. The development of this was also guided by earlier efforts to advocate the value of formulating leadership models or frameworks which take contextual matters – in this case the context of the novel coronavirus – into serious consideration (Wilson et al., 2018). That approach argued model-building efforts ought to consider

factors such as the key challenges of salience and the purpose, values and norms which should guide leadership action in a given context. It also encouraged attention to the boundaries of leadership action, as well to identifying context-relevant expectations of leaders, followers and their relationship. Drawing on such considerations, along with analysis of key themes emerging from New Zealand's pandemic experience thus far, informed the development of the framework below. In what follows, I discuss each element, offer illustrative examples from New Zealand and draw some connections to established scholarly ideas. When deploying a specific element of the framework this is signalled by way of italicised text. My hope is that this framework may offer useful ideas for application by anyone playing a leadership role that involves grappling with the pandemic.

Foster a shared purpose: Minimise harm to lives and livelihoods

The nature of the novel coronavirus, including its modes of transmission and adverse impacts of the human body, means its existence poses dramatic and unprecedented disruptions to established ways of managing our lives, organisations and societies and, being a virus, humans cannot simply command its obedience to our wishes. Moreover, to grapple any semblance of control over its spread, managerial and command-oriented responses alone are insufficient: the suite of problems posed by coronavirus are neither simply tame nor critical but, rather, fundamentally wicked in nature (Grint, 2010). Grappling with coronavirus therefore depends on a leadership response in which efforts are focussed on 'engaging a community in facing up to complex collective problems' (Grint, 2010: 308). To enable this, a sense of *shared purpose* or mission must be nurtured.

As discussed, having listened to advice from a range of experts Ardern's government came to adopt as its *purpose* or mission the bold ambition of securing control over the spread of the virus in New Zealand, to achieve the noble ideal of saving lives (*minimise harm to lives*) and, through so doing, position New Zealand for a faster economic recovery (*minimise harm to livelihoods*) (Ardern, 2020c). It has been deliberate and persistent in seeking to persuade all New Zealanders to *share* in the pursuit of this, using the core branding of 'Unite against COVID-19' (see, www.covid19.govt.nz). As evidenced earlier, it has been highly effective in garnering community support.

The bold approach of seeking to gain tight control over the virus's spread was rooted in the strategic, 'balcony view' (Heifetz, 1994) appreciation and practical wisdom (Shotter and Tsoukas, 2014) that there was but a brief window of opportunity in which such an ambitious aim existed as a potentially viable course of action – and that delay would see New Zealand facing the same disastrous health and economic suffering being experienced in so many other countries. However, Ardern's government had early on signalled its commitment to a precautionary, science-led approach, including a willingness to go above and beyond WHO advice to manage risks to public health (Ardern, 2020d), and to move quickly to provide support to businesses and workers disrupted by the effects of COVID-19 (Ardern, Peters & Shaw, 2020).

A particular lesson to be taken for 'pandemic leadership' is then, I suggest, that where leaders adopt a precautionary, science-led approach, coupled with a willingness to act quickly and decisively, this creates the opportunity to pursue the bold ambition of securing control over the virus, the noble ideal of saving lives and, at the same time, supports the need to limit economic disruption. This may be where 'best practice' in terms of minimizing harm to lives and livelihoods begins. Failure to create and act on such opportunities, in

contrast, sets the scene for both mass fatalities and massive, ongoing, economic disruption. However, even under such adverse circumstances fostering a shared sense of purpose that aims to minimise harm to lives and livelihoods still seems of utmost salience for good pandemic leadership, no matter where on the epidemic curve a given locale is situated. That purpose provides an overall objective for ‘pandemic leadership’ as a particular form of leadership or set of leadership practices.

To help achieve this objective I now turn to consider the key leadership practices that the model comprises based on this case study of the New Zealand experience, noting that, as Figure 1 below seeks to convey, all of these can assist in building trust in leadership, an intangible currency of immeasurable value for sustaining both democratic norms and institutions and well-functioning organisations. As the social identity theory of leadership explains, if we trust that leaders are acting to *serve* our shared interests then transformative collective action becomes possible (Haslam and Reicher, 2016). Such transformative, collective action is the survival imperative posed by the pandemic, hence the critical role of practices that serve to build trust.

Be led by expertise

I identified earlier how the New Zealand government’s approach has been guided by *scientific advice, facts, evidence* and a willingness to *listen* to those with relevant expertise to help inform its decision making. The preceding analysis has pointed to the potentially significant benefits that come from being led by expertise, while the consequences of ignoring or being

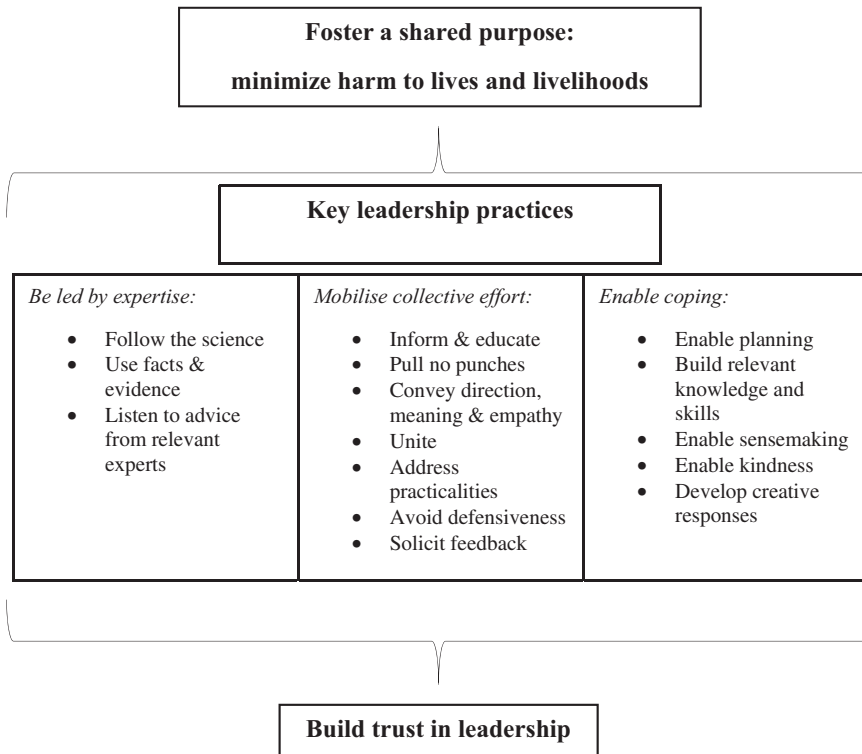


Figure 1. Pandemic leadership: A good practice framework.

slow to act on such advice are now evident in countries who have been unable to contain the spread of the virus. Hence the only further point, from a leadership practice perspective, that I want to make here is that this aspect of the framework highlights the need for leaders to be willing to *follow* the advice of those who have pandemic-relevant expertise. This also helps in ensuring leaders' claims that a 'crisis' exists are grounded in objective criteria (see Spector, this issue). Multiple studies of dysfunctional leadership point to arrogance, hubris and a refusal to listen as key factors that contribute to failures of leadership (Hogan et al., 2010; Tourish, 2018). A willingness by leaders to themselves be led by expertise thus serves to both reduce the risk of dysfunctional and ineffective pandemic leadership as well as providing a platform for effective 'pandemic leadership' practice. Simply, the lesson from New Zealand is that to lead well in a pandemic context, leaders must first themselves be willing to be led by those with relevant expertise. This creates a platform for building trust.

Mobilise collective effort

To mobilise the community to take on the shaped purpose of minimizing harm to lives and livelihoods, a range of practices have been deployed by Ardern and her government that have potential transferability to other locales. A strong emphasis has gone to *inform and educate* the public about coronavirus. In a Facebook Live session on February 29, for example, Ardern and Health Minister David Clark emphasise the importance of regular hand washing, explain what social distancing is and why it matters, explain where to get help for those with possible symptoms and encourage people to avoid panic buying of groceries (Ardern 2020d). These kinds of messages have been reinforced many times in government advertising (see www.covid19.govt.nz) and in the near-daily press conferences. The MoH provides a daily update on cases and regular updates on pandemic-related issues, such as testing availability, the provision of PPE, the latest studies about the virus, contact tracing and border control measures. Other government departments also provide pandemic-related advice specific to their portfolios, which is updated regularly. Having credible and timely information creates the foundation for the kind of shared understanding of the nature of the problems and what needs to be done about them that is needed if mobilisation of collective effort is to occur – and helps build trust.

A further feature of the mobilizing effort adopted by Ardern and colleagues has been to *pull no punches* when it comes to ensuring people understand the risks and effects of the pandemic. On March 16, for example, Ardern warned the economic impacts for New Zealand would likely be worse than the global financial crisis (Ardern, 2020e). Three days later, in a Facebook Live session after the government announced an economic support package, she made it clear while the government was seeking to mitigate the effects, recovery would be slow (Ardern, 2020f). In announcing the lockdown on March 23 she stated bluntly that the latest modelling showed 'up to tens of thousands of New Zealanders could die from COVID-19' if the move to lockdown did not take place with urgency and people did not follow the rules the government had set. She warned that even with the lockdown 'things will look worse before they get better' (Ardern, 2020c). Hard (but credible) messages such as this help mobilise collective action – and help build trust.

However, a crucially important balance is struck in Ardern and colleagues' mobilizing efforts. Informed by Mayfield and Mayfield's (2018) motivating language theory, I found many examples, most especially in Ardern's communication, where a delicate blend of language use and intonation conveys *direction, meaning and empathy* (while still pulling no

punches). This, I suggest, facilitates the giving of hard messages while also limiting the risk of people feeling overwhelmed, or that the government doesn't understand or care about the impact of its decisions on individuals. Heifetz calls this 'regulating distress' and emphasises its critical role in navigating people through times of change (Heifetz, 1994).

As an example, immediately after stating that 'up to tens of thousands of New Zealanders could die', which is basically the worst news any New Zealand Prime Minister has had to give the country in living memory, she offers this to help frame the meaning of what is being asked of people and to indicate an empathetic appreciation of what it involves: 'Everything you will all give up for the next few weeks, all the lost contact with others, all of the isolation, and difficult time entertaining children – it will literally save lives. Thousands of lives' (Arden, 2020c). This conveys a higher purpose and meaning to what is being asked as part of the mobilising effort, whilst also conveying an empathetic appreciation of the kinds of personal impacts it involves for people. Empathetic connection, in particular, is a strength of Arden's leadership and she constantly weaves that into her communicative efforts. Her Facebook live sessions are, for a head of state, quite remarkably informal, chatty and personable interactions and in these she constantly engages in providing direction, explains the wider significance or higher meaning of the mobilising effort and demonstrate an empathetic concern for how others are affected by the pandemic. In social media speak it is fair to say it also makes Arden #relatable – and this helps build trust.

Unite is quite literally the part of the government's key branding in response to the pandemic: Unite against COVID-19. However, other efforts to reinforce the importance of collective mobilisation includes the constant use of terms or phrases such as 'we', 'us', 'all New Zealanders', 'a team of 5 million', along with praising the fact that most people have acted as directed while challenging breaches, all of which aids to reinforce the criticality of a unified effort (e.g. Arden, 2020c; 2020g; 'Government extends lockdown to Monday April 27', 2020). While appeals to national unity by leaders have long been *de rigour* in crises, unity does play a special role in combatting COVID-19. This is because every single person breaching measures that limit the virus's spread quite literally increases the risk for everyone else. In the context of 'pandemic leadership', then, efforts to unite people in contributing to the shared purpose are especially important. Leaders' constant attention to the critical role of unity helps build trust, especially once people have grasped how the virus spreads.

A further key practice in mobilizing collective effort to be drawn from the New Zealand experience is the importance that leaders *address practicalities*. Execution of strategic direction is always key – and effective execution requires attention to practicalities (Barnard, 1938). In a pandemic context, with normal daily routines being significantly disrupted, multiple questions quite naturally and legitimately arise for people – for example, where can I go to buy food and how do I do so safely; can I walk my dog, if so where; how do I help my child who is missing out on school – and so on and so on. In daily press briefing, set speeches, Facebook Live sessions, government advertising and websites, enormous effort has gone to trying to address these practicalities (e.g. Arden, 2020c, 2020d; 2020e; www.covid.govt.nz) – and, of course, not everything has been perfect. However, failure to grasp the fundamental importance of such matters could easily derail the effectiveness of other elements of 'pandemic leadership' hence, while seemingly prosaic or mundane, the significance of attending to these matters should not be underestimated. Attentiveness to such matters demonstrates a leader's interest in, knowledge of and concern for matters that affect those they lead (Haslam and Reicher, 2016) – and this helps to build trust.

As I noted, of course not everything has been perfect in the New Zealand government's response. There have been ongoing concerns about access to PPE for those involved in health care or other essential services (Braae, 2020). Access to COVID-19 testing was slow to gear up, with people facing both delays and conflicting advice from clinicians about their eligibility to receive a test (Ensor and Stanford, 2002). Debates about border restrictions, government support to businesses, workers and those on welfare and the timing, duration and rules at different Alert Levels are ongoing (e.g. Burrowes, 2020; Small, 2020). These will continue, as should be expected in a liberal democracy. However, a notable feature is that Ardern, other key Ministers and key public servants have sought to *avoid defensiveness* when faced with questions or criticisms. Unlike in the US, for example, the tenor of the almost daily press conferences held under Alert Level 4 is notable for the calm and open manner in which Ministers or senior public servants respond directly to questions and the absence of palpable tensions between them and the press gallery (see, for example, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E319CIMzI3k>). This too aids in building trust.

The final key practice I suggest in relation to mobilizing collective effort is to *solicit feedback*. Ardern's Facebook live sessions offer her direct, unvarnished access to the public's perceptions and concerns, opening the way for what Tourish calls 'critical upwards communication' and which he argues is a critical safeguard against dysfunctional leadership (Tourish, 2018). It is clear that Ardern uses these sessions not only to convey key messages but, also, to gauge what are 'hot topics' of concern, which she can then follow up on with officials. Journalists raising concerns about breaches of the requirements at a given Alert Level have likewise been invited to provide further details for official to investigate. All this serves to increase leaders' grasp of where execution is not matching policy or where gaps in policy exist – and to build trust.

Enable coping

A range of leadership practices are evident in the New Zealand government's response which help to enable coping with the challenges posed by the pandemic.

The Alert Level system, for example, provides a key tool to *enable planning* by government, organisations and families. While subject to ongoing elaboration about what activities are permitted at each level, it has nonetheless been a critical tool that helps in preparing for what movement up or down the Alert Levels means in practical terms. When Alert Levels have changed, time frames for review have been given and, as the end of the initial lockdown period neared, the government explained the factors it would consider in making that decision. All these actions enable planning – and also serve to build trust through providing transparency about government decision making.

In what must be amongst the most overused phrase of the year, the pandemic is having unprecedented effects on our world. That means people need to quickly *build relevant knowledge and skills* if they are to cope under such disruptive conditions. To assist directly and personally with this, Jacinda Ardern has conducted a series of 'Conversations through COVID-19' in which *she* has interviewed experts or practitioners from varying fields. These include an interview with a psychologist, to explore ideas for coping with the stresses of the pandemic (Ardern and Latta, 2002); with an experienced business mentor who works with entrepreneurs and small businesses, to explore how people can support small businesses and what small business owners can and should be doing (Ardern and Hamilton, 2002); and with

a business owner of an essential service that was permitted to operate under Level 4 to explore what they did to make that viable (Ardern and Taulelei, 2002). Quite literally, she has played the role of educator-in-chief, using her platform to help build relevant knowledge and skills that aid in coping with the pandemic – and which also builds trust in leadership.

To *enable sensemaking*, something generally understood as a key leadership practice (Smircich and Morgan, 1982) a number of key actions have been taken. The first is the ‘Unite against COVID-19’ strapline as the overarching mission or purpose to which people are asked to lend their support. The Alert Level framework already discussed doesn’t only enable planning and transparency about decision making but also assists in sensemaking. The language of ‘alert levels’ almost immediately became part of the everyday lexicon of New Zealanders. However, a further key concept for sensemaking is that of a ‘bubble’ (Ardern, 2020h). A ‘bubble’ initially comprised only those people with whom one shared their household under Alert Level 4. ‘Sticking to your bubble’ therefore meant avoiding any contact under 2 m with anyone ‘outside your bubble’, thus enabling the containment of chains of transmission to only those within a given household. ‘Bursting a bubble’ increases the risk of transmission between households and is therefore to be avoided. Under Alert Level 3, people are allowed to ‘expand their bubble’, but only to a very limited degree to mitigate the risks of untraced cases triggering a resurgence of community transmission. As a simple to grasp metaphor that conveys crucial scientific advice, the ‘bubble’ has been pivotal in enabling New Zealanders to make sense of how they should personally act to contribute to the shared mission. These sensemaking efforts have also helped build trust through providing a shared language that enables clear communication.

Recognising a pandemic creates multiple stressors for people, a further feature of the government’s response has been a focus on *enabling kindness*. Ardern specifically asked that all New Zealanders ‘be kind’ and offer support to one another when announcing the move to Level 4 (Ardern, 2020c). The government’s key COVID website has resources reflecting an interest in kindness and in the lead up to Easter the Prime Minister confirmed that both the Tooth Fairy and the Easter Bunny were essential workers, thus demonstrating kindness to children and parents (Easter Bunny ‘essential worker, says PM’, 2020). When advised that some commercial landlords were increasing rents while under Alert Level 4, something the government was unable to prohibit, she condemned such actions as ‘utterly unfathomable’ and asked that landlords ‘just be a good human being’ (Molyneux and Lynch, 2020). A focus on kindness has, of course, been an enduring value that Ardern has emphasised (I want the government . . . to bring kindness back, 2017), however perhaps more people have come to appreciate its importance in such testing times. Either way, this focus on a universal human value of such salience in the context of a pandemic likely builds trust in leadership.

The final key leadership practice my analysis has identified is that of *developing creative responses*. Novel coronavirus poses novel problems and much of what we used to take for granted doesn’t apply at this point in time. A couple of key initiatives that exemplify the kind of creative thinking that the government has been willing to try in an effort to respond to various effects of the pandemic include, firstly, a wage subsidy scheme that basically requires only a brief declaration for employers to access it. While accessing government benefits normally requires extensive paperwork and cautious decision-making, with small businesses being such a significant part of the New Zealand economy this policy is, as at 24 April, now supporting 1.6 million New Zealanders and NZ\$10.4 billion has already been paid out (Robertson and Sepuloni, 2020). A second key example is a home schooling

package, which includes learning resources, including laptops and modems where needed, delivered directly to homes to support parents in helping children learn, along with the creation of two television channels to provide online learning opportunities, thus relieving teachers of some of the load associated with learning how to teach remotely for the first time (Hipkins, 2020). The government's seeming willingness to try to whatever it can to minimise harm to lives and livelihoods, even when so doing involves radical changes in government policies and practices, builds trust that leadership is committed to the shared purpose.

Conclusion

It is abundantly clear that leading in the context of a pandemic is no easy feat and the pandemic globally has exposed many individual and systemic weaknesses in leadership capability, at the cost of lives. However, even doing just a few things well can likely make some positive difference to lives and livelihoods. Doing quite a few things quite well can, based on this case study, seemingly make a significant difference – although of course the long-term implications remain unknown. Other countries have, just like New Zealand, contained the initial wave of infection, relaxed restrictions and then seen the virus quickly rebound. At the time of writing it is simply too soon to know if this, too, could arise in New Zealand. Obviously, I very much hope that does not happen. However, even if New Zealand should, at some point, find ourselves in a situation closer the dire straits being experienced by those in other countries, for a brief time, at least, we have had here leadership that has made a difference and for that, at least, I'm grateful. If others can take lessons from that experience, which the pandemic leadership framework offered here seeks to crystallise, and thereby generate some reduction in harm to lives and livelihoods then that is even better.

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Note

1. When epidemiologists speak of 'eradication', this does mean zero cases or zero possibility of any future cases such as a layperson might interpret it to mean. Rather it means that the case load is sufficiently close to zero, in a given location, such that testing, contact tracing and isolation of cases can break chains of transmission while social distancing measures prevent further cases. New Zealand eased its lockdown measures on April 26 on the basis that it had reached this position.

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