

OPINION

The Pandemic Shows Why Philanthropy Should Support Efforts to Improve Leadership Practices Across the Globe

By *Victor Dukay, MBA, PhD and Kathy Irene Kennedy, DrPH, MA* | APRIL 12, 2021



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The *New England Journal of Medicine* has speculated that New Zealand's success in controlling the pandemic was the result of Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's "empathic leadership," noting that she "effectively communicated key messages to the public – framing combating the pandemic as the work of a unified 'team of 5 million.'"

The global philanthropic response to the Covid-19 pandemic has been stunning in its size, scope, and palpable sense of urgency. The Center for Disaster Philanthropy [estimates that an astonishing \\$20.2 billion](#) was generated during this past year for all manner of programs, including vaccine development and production, food banks, and economic assistance.

While all of this is crucial to addressing a pandemic that has killed more than [2.7 million people](#), it is just the beginning. Achieving the level of public trust necessary to build global herd immunity will require a level of confidence in our leaders that was often absent during a pandemic in which some officials failed to encourage even basic public health protocols.

Without skilled leaders, efforts to manufacture, equitably distribute, and build public acceptance for the vaccination programs will fall perilously short. And adopting aggressive efforts to restore economic vitality and curb social inequalities worldwide will depend on effective decision makers.

That's why ensuring that the best leaders rise to the challenge must become part of the philanthropic response to the health crisis now and in its aftermath. Investing in research focused on improving leadership practices is a good place to start.

Leadership science has been a respected field of academic research for nearly a century. When applied in the business world, the [attributes of effective](#) leaders enhance innovation and increase profits. Similarly, [data-driven leadership in professional sports](#) results in improvements in individual and team performance.

Identifying the attributes that characterize effective — and ineffective — leaders can mean the difference between life and death as Covid-19 becomes [endemic](#) and future pandemics loom ominously on the horizon.

The science exists to empirically evaluate leaders through rigorous unbiased research, and the pandemic provides a mountain of data for such analysis. Yet little or no effort has gone into mobilizing scientific expertise to determine how decision makers can effectively lead through pandemics, climate change, and other global crises.

Such research is sorely needed. It should explore the tensions that have emerged among elected leaders, public health officials, and the public. It should analyze the relative outcomes, for example, between leaders who collaborated with the scientific community and those who marginalized scientists or terminated their employment. And it should test the theory that women leaders have generally [outperformed their male counterparts](#) in responding to the pandemic catastrophe.

A Call to Action

As scholars in applied leadership science, we are calling upon grant makers and philanthropists to provide seed capital to support the development of a [strategy to analyze leadership](#) during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Measuring progress against Covid-19 as documented in such data as vaccine distribution rates, virus positivity rates, deaths, and the resumption of normal economic activities would clearly identify the relative effectiveness of leadership [practices](#) exhibited in each country or community. One objective of such research would be to quantify the behaviors and practices of decision makers so that they can be incorporated in epidemiological models alongside data on successful treatment options and vaccine effectiveness rates.

The findings could be used by politicians, scientists, and the public to mitigate the health and economic consequences of future crises and to address the disproportionate impact on marginalized communities. For example, they could help us understand why New Zealand had [extraordinary success](#) in stopping the spread of the virus while Sweden had one of the highest [death rates per capita](#) in hard-hit Europe.

The [New England Journal of Medicine](#) has speculated that New Zealand's success was the result of Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's "empathic leadership," noting that she "effectively communicated key messages to the public — framing combating the pandemic as the work of a unified 'team of 5 million' — which resulted in high public confidence and adherence to a suite of relatively burdensome pandemic-control measures."

Meanwhile, in Sweden, the approach adopted was to let the virus spread to achieve herd immunity as quickly as possible even though the country's leading public health expert warned that it was a "defeatist and headless strategy." He accurately predicted that it would result in thousands of preventable deaths.

A Road Map for Public Health Officials

Quantifying the attributes characterized by these very different leadership models can provide the measures for empirical assessments of decision makers at all levels of government and provide a road map for public health officials to lead and communicate more effectively during the next crisis.

Philanthropic funds to support such research could expand applied leadership science to the scale that is truly needed with support from agencies such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the National Institutes of Health and their counterparts in other nations. Scientists can then gather and analyze empirical data on the actions taken by leaders around the world and the resulting outcomes.

This financing strategy has proven successful in other research endeavors. For instance, philanthropic support for the [Test & Treat](#) program to end AIDS spurred the federal government to fund innovative research and pursue programs to address a pandemic that has killed more than 32 million people to date. The initial investment of a few million dollars by philanthropic foundations and individuals resulted in billions in federal money to expand a program that has helped halt the spread of AIDS globally and enabled countless HIV-positive people to live normal lives.

Test & Treat also demonstrates that funding comprehensive long-term approaches to problems is far more effective than simply pouring resources into short-term relief programs, as important as that is during the early stages of a disaster.

The Covid-19 crisis [will be with us for years](#). Even with successful vaccination programs, Americans who are already struggling with pandemic fatigue will likely need to continue following masking and social-distancing protocols until at least 2022. Confidence in our leaders and trust in the competence of their decisions are essential to meet the challenges on our path to herd immunity, economic stability, and a return to normal life.

Long after this crisis ends, future [pandemics](#) and threats to our planet will likely test our leaders even more than the present health catastrophe.

Philanthropy can spark a long-term investment in 21st-century leadership that is better prepared to protect health, safety, and livelihoods; more capable of mobilizing diverse communities; and humbled by the hard lessons learned in 2020 about what it really means to navigate a global disaster. Let's use this crisis to better understand what it will take to lead the next one.

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For additional information about [BENDING THE CURVE: Understanding How Leadership Affects Pandemic Responses](#) project, contact Victor Dukay, MBA, PhD at vic@lundyfoundation.org



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