

Times of Crisis: Women and Leadership

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic has demonstrated that countries with greater women's rights and support for female leadership exhibit more socially progressive policies and competencies when managing crisis. Throughout this tumultuous time, headlines celebrating the success of female leaders' abilities to manage the spread of Covid-19 dominated popular media prompting a reexamination of gender and leadership during times of crisis. Unique to times of crisis, those traits associated with femininity are welcomed and deemed appropriate by communities and corporations alike and are associated with strong leadership abilities. At a time when the likelihood of failure is heightened, women are often promoted into leadership positions (glass cliff). This suggests that they are being set up to fail. Whether the act of setting women up for failure is true or an unconscious gender bias, it must not be assumed that female leaders are ill equipped for the task at hand nor are they naively accepting these fallible roles. Women show a natural tendency for transformational leadership which means

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they have the ability to lead with empathy and integrity and inspire followers to act selflessly for the greater good. These are the very traits that are appropriately suited for leadership roles during crises. This ability to understand followers' needs at a deeper level and act accordingly explains actions that female transformational leaders have made. The barriers in place preventing the rise of women into higher-level leadership positions in business are based on outdated concepts of gender roles. They are not based on merit. Further research needs to investigate the effectiveness of women in leadership roles during crisis situations.

Keywords

Women · Leadership · Crisis · Covid-19 · Transformational leadership

Introduction

In early 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic gripped the business world as lockdowns were launched and stay-at-home orders were commonly issued. Businesses suffered and the threat of economic downturn was felt by many organizations around the world. Throughout this tumultuous time, headlines celebrating the success of female leaders' abilities to manage the spread of Covid-19 and the effects that the pandemic was having on organizations dominated popular media prompting a reexamination of gender and leadership during times of crisis. Despite years of literature that suggests that women are equally fit for positions of leadership to their male counterparts, it is only now during the Covid-19 pandemic that female leadership traits and styles are capturing the spotlight and being applauded. But why?

A McKinsey consulting report, *Women in the Workplace 2021*, states that "women are rising to the moment as stronger leaders and taking on the extra work that comes with this: compared to men at the same level, women are doing more to support their teams and advance diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts" (Thomas et al., 2021, p. 5). According to the report, women are increasing their representation in corporate offices but are primarily being promoted to comparatively lower levels of management than men. It is likely that this "broken rung" in the employment ladder lies at the heart of the misrepresentation of women in senior positions (Thomas et al., 2021). The story is worse for women of color. Yet, it is female leaders who appear to be strong and vibrant leaders during times of crisis.

Although this chapter focuses on women in business, women political leaders play an equally important role and should not be ignored. Women in both sectors are faced with similar challenges when jockeying for leadership positions, and many political bureaucracies often mirror the structures of large businesses. Therefore, the impact that leaders like Margaret Thatcher, Angela Merkel, and Jacinda Ardern have during times of crisis supports this analysis of women leaders in business during these tumultuous times.

Currently there are 21 women serving as heads of state out of 193 nations globally; and there are only 41 female CEOs of Fortune 500 companies, up from

2 in the year 2000 (Spencer Sairam, 2021; Hinchliffe, 2021). Disturbingly, these numbers highlight an overarching gender imbalance and how slow the progress has been in achieving greater female representation in higher-level leadership roles.

The intent of this chapter is to shed light on why women are rising as exemplars of leadership during times of crisis. To accomplish this we will explore the concept of the double-bind, which explains how perceived gendered traits both cause the aforementioned imbalance based on gender and also how these traits paradoxically propel women into leadership positions during times of crisis. This then leads to a discussion on how women's predispositions for transformational styles of leadership are often welcomed during crisis management efforts. Finally, we will examine how a feminine society can support a greater level of organizational sustainability overall but specifically during times of crisis.

Double-Bind

Mainstream gender discourse is responsible for shaping beliefs and expectations about how men and women should speak, act, and behave (Sunderland, 2004). Traits that are believed to be inherently female are often criticized in business and government, resulting in female leaders finding themselves in what is called a double-bind. Masculine traits such as assertiveness, self-confidence, and ambition, are associated with leadership (Baxter, 2015; Haugen & Pigott, 2017), while those associated with femininity such as getting along with others, being helpful and supportive, and nurturing are seen as being weak and therefore undervalued in leadership settings (Baxter, 2015; Elliott & Stead, 2018; Zenger & Folkman, 2020). The double-bind occurs when female leaders who exhibit traits associated with femininity are seen as having inferior leadership capabilities and those who exhibit traits associated with masculinity are seen as unlikeable, mean, and unfeminine.

Yet, unique to times of crisis, those traits associated with femininity are welcomed and deemed appropriate by communities and corporations alike and are associated with strong leadership abilities (Vroman & Danko, 2020; Windsor et al., 2020). Examples of these inherently female traits have been demonstrated by numerous female political and business leaders during the Covid-19 pandemic (Luoto & Varella, 2021). Erna Solberg, Prime Minister of Norway, held a Facebook Live to explain the pandemic and answer questions from Norwegian children (Johnson & Williams, 2020). New Zealand Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern, promised an “empathetic government” and urged citizens to be kind and caring (Johnson & Williams, 2020). Ardern has also been seen in Facebook Live addresses in casual attire with her daughter in the background, thus creating a relatable image to public viewers who are also working from home (The Guardian, 2021). Even German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who is known for her fact-based approach, showed emotion during her Covid-19 addresses (Mayer & May, 2021). On the business side, Karen Lynch, chief executive officer of CVS Health Corporation, spoke of the company's mission to be there for individuals, to improve the health of local communities and the nation, and to “[try] to help America prevail against the pandemic” (U.S. News & World

Report, 2021). Mary Barra, chief executive officer of General Motors (GM), shifted the automaker's production lines to help Ventec Life Systems make ventilators. In the company's return to work strategy, Barra asked GM's 155,000 global employees to "work appropriately" (Jones & Burho, 2021; Wayland, 2021).

Women and Leadership in Crises

Despite there being a double-bind for female leaders, in times of crisis women are often promoted into leadership positions (Barratt, 2021). Ryan and Haslam (2005) coined this phenomenon the glass cliff. A glass cliff suggests that women who are promoted to positions of leadership during times of crisis, a time when the chance of failure is highest, are being set up for failure. This can be seen as an act of scapegoating so that poor organizational performance can be blamed on poor leadership, thus providing fuel for the fire that women are not suited for leadership. Whether the act of setting women up for failure is intentional or because of unconscious gender bias, it must not be assumed that female leaders are naively accepting these potentially ill-fated roles or that they are poorly equipped for the task at hand (Barratt, 2021).

A case study conducted by Cosentino and Paoloni (2021) identified female managerial skills as major drivers of success during times of crisis and organizational resilience. Women's attitudes toward change, abilities to promote new initiatives, and abilities to maintain and create strong relationships with stakeholders were cited as being the key characteristics that helped deliver favorable outcomes. Similarly, a survey conducted by Zenger and Folkman (2019) on gender differences in areas of leadership yielded results that indicated that women were rated higher than their male peers in 12 out of 16 areas of leadership. Specifically, they noted that females most greatly outscored males in the areas of taking initiative and driving results, two skills that are required of leaders during times of crisis in both government and business. These results are supported by effective leadership research which also identifies direction-giving, meaning-making, and empathy as being essential for leaders to motivate followers (Mayfield & Mayfield, 2017).

A McKinsey consulting study during the 2008 financial crisis pointed out that organizations with three or more female senior executives scored higher in two key characteristics deemed necessary to successfully come through a crisis. The "leadership team," defined "as the ability of leaders – collectively and at whatever level – to guide and inspire action," was seen as the most important factor (Desvaux et al., 2010, p. 12). "Direction," defined as "the ability to define where a company is heading and the resources needed to get there, and unite its people in achieving this vision," ranked a close second (Desvaux et al., 2010, p. 12). When they asked what types of leadership behaviors would be necessary to propel them through a crisis, nine (9) behaviors emerged – people development, expectations and rewards, role model, inspiration, participative decision-making, intellectual stimulation, effective communication, individualistic decision-making, and control and corrective action. Of these nine (9) behaviors, their study showed that women applied people

development, expectations and rewards, role modeling, applied inspiration, and participative decision-making more than their male counterparts. The report further discovered it was those very types of leadership behaviors displayed by women that were “critical” in guiding an organization not only through a crisis but beyond it (Desvaux et al., 2010).

Despite the existence of a glass cliff and in support of the above findings, there are numerous examples when female leaders prevailed in the face of adversity. Unsurprisingly, the recent Covid-19 pandemic has produced many more. For instance, just a few months into Karen Lynch’s role of managing CVS’s Covid response as executive vice-president, it was announced that she would be promoted to chief executive officer (Peebles, 2021). Under Lynch’s leadership, CVS continues to “outperform expectations” and reported a third quarter sales increase of 10% (Japsen, 2021). In June 2020, Carol Tomé came out of retirement to assume the appointment of chief executive officer of United Postal Service (UPS) (Jones & Burho, 2021). Tomé focused on strengthening logistics for the 2020 holiday season and then later on the delivery of Covid-19 vaccines in the United States (Jones & Burho, 2021). Since the start of the pandemic, UPS has experienced double-digit percentage growth in delivery volumes annually (Jones & Burho, 2021). In February 2021, Jane Fraser was promoted to chief executive officer of Citigroup and is the first female CEO in history to run a major Wall Street bank (Hinchliffe, 2021). Previously, Fraser leads the company’s corporate strategy and mergers and acquisitions during the 2008 financial crisis (Citigroup, 2021). In the political realm, Samia Suluh Hassan was elected president of Tanzania in 2021 whereby she reversed her predecessor’s stance on Covid-19 by acknowledging it as a serious public health threat, encouraging masking, testing, social distancing, and securing vaccinations (Juma, 2021).

Transformational Leadership

Just as traits can be interpreted as being gender specific, they also align with characteristics of leadership styles. Female traits like empathy and nurturing are present in transformational, democratic, and authentic styles of leadership, whereas male traits of confidence and assertiveness are present in transactional and situational styles of leadership (KPMG, 2019). The McKinsey report similarly found that male leaders were most likely to utilize individualistic decision-making, control, and corrective action (Desvaux et al., 2010). Kotter (1990) warns that leadership styles that are aligned with rewards, like transactional leadership, become ineffective during times of crisis (Brown & Nwagbara, 2021). The parallels between gendered traits and styles extend beyond theoretical discourse as practitioner-based reports from McKinsey consulting and KPMG displayed similar findings. KPMG surveyed female executives who described their own leadership styles as being authentic, democratic, or transformational, and 58% believed that transformational leadership was required to reach senior executive levels (KPMG, 2019).

Women show a natural tendency for transformational leadership which means they have the ability to lead with empathy and integrity and inspire followers to act selflessly for the greater good. These are the very traits that are appropriately suited for leadership roles during crises (Bass, 1985; Bass et al., 2003). This is because transformational leaders often understand followers' needs at a deeper level which stems from the fact that the leaders' personal values often mirror the values held by those they lead (Brown & Nwagbara, 2021). This connection explains the actions that female transformational leaders have made (Howell & Avolio, 1993).

New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern identified school closures as a "last resort" citing that not only do these public health measures disproportionately affect women and low-income families but also that there are negative health and educational consequences that school closures can have on children (Trevett, 2022; Aldrich & Lotito, 2020). As a woman and mother, herself, this was a decision that was likely made to help working mothers remain active in the workforce and to curtail the widening inequities between households (Aldrich & Lotito, 2020; Trevett, 2022).

This deeper level of understanding both stakeholders' and organizations' values is why we see transformational leaders in business, like Karen Lynch and Mary Barra, excel in their roles as CEOs. Karen Lynch of CVS, who as a young child lost her mother to suicide and later her aunt and guardian to failing health, is dedicated to providing access to healthcare for millions of Americans (U.S. News & World Report, 2021). Mary Barra, who started at GM in 1980 as a co-op student, has worked her way up through the ranks to the top position as CEO (GM, n.d.a, b). Due to her technical training as an engineer and years of experience understanding the company, its people, and its stakeholders' needs, it is clear why Barra continues to drive GM's success. This notion is exemplified in her simple and empowering directions for employees to "work appropriately" and "dress appropriately" (Duke Fuqua School of Business, 2021; also see Wayland, 2021). Finally, research supports that transformational leaders, as a whole, tend to deliver the best organizational outcomes (Brown & Nwagbara, 2021).

Feminine Societies

What the Covid-19 pandemic has demonstrated is that more feminine societies fare better overall (Windsor et al., 2020). Countries with more socially progressive policies, healthier citizens, greater women's rights, and support for female leadership have demonstrated greater competencies when managing crises (Windsor et al., 2020). For instance, proactive policy implementation allowed Taiwan's Tsai Ing-wen to take swift action to prevent the spread of Covid-19 early in the pandemic because of the country's experience managing the 2003 SARs outbreak (Cheng, 2021). She was also able to appeal to cultural values of citizens by stating that Taiwan would be playing an important role during this pandemic by manufacturing masks and medical supplies for the global community (Mayer & May, 2021). Nordic countries (Iceland, Finland, Denmark, Norway, and Sweden), which are known for

their progressive-social policies and world-class healthcare systems, represent 4 out of the 21 female-led countries in the world (Spencer Sairam, 2021). All of the Nordic countries have been applauded for their management of the pandemic, with the exception of Sweden which received criticism early on, as then Prime Minister Stefan Löfven opted for a herd immunity approach to managing the disease. It is estimated that this approach resulted in a death rate 3 to 10% higher when compared to other Nordic countries (Guenot, 2021). From a corporate perspective, Mary Barra (GM) advocates that by providing employees with a place of employment which allows them to feel respected and valued and provides equitable access to all opportunities, GM will be more competitive on the global scale (Duke Fuqua School of Business, 2021). Notably, GM is a leader in diversity, equity, and inclusion in the workplace and is one of the most diverse automakers globally (GM, n.d.a, b). Barra is the only female CEO of a major automaker in history, and nearly half of their Board of Directors are women. The takeaway here is that these societies and organizations are better equipped to manage crises precisely because of the diverse perspectives and skills that have resulted from equitable opportunities for women in leadership roles. It is evident that societies and organizations who wish to perform and achieve a greater level of sustainability in times of crisis would be wise to embrace female leaders, their voices, and attributes that are feminine and egalitarian.

Conclusion

Throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first century, women have struggled to break through the glass ceiling that has kept them from executive positions in business. Gender discourse and social norms about women's abilities to lead are antiquated and continue to stifle opportunities for women to fulfill their leadership potential. In spite of the glass cliff phenomenon and the heightened chance of failure, women are highly competent leaders when presented with leadership opportunities. This may be in part due to women's natural tendency toward a transformational leadership style, a style that is ideal during times of change and uncertainty. Therefore, it is only logical that businesses should actively invite women into leadership roles especially during times of uncertainty that are brought about by crises. Upon further contemplation of this topic, we must ask, if women have the abilities to be successful leaders when the odds are against them, why are organizations still failing to provide them with opportunities for higher-level leadership under normal circumstances?

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