

CRISIS MANAGEMENT

# What Good Leadership Looks Like During This Pandemic

by [Michaela J. Kerrissey](#) and [Amy C. Edmondson](#)

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Left: Hagen Hopkins/Getty Images; Right: Jun Sato/Getty Images

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The speed and scope of the coronavirus crisis poses extraordinary challenges for leaders in today's vital institutions. It is easy to understand why so many have missed opportunities for decisive action and honest communication. But it is a mistake to think that failures of leadership are all we can expect in these grim times.

Consider Adam Silver, the commissioner of the National Basketball Association (NBA), who — way back on March 11 — took the then-surprising step of suspending the professional basketball league for the season. Silver's decision was one of the earliest high-profile responses to the virus outside China. He delivered it at a time of great uncertainty; coincidentally, March 11 was the day that the World Health Organization formally designated the coronavirus a pandemic.

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When the situation is uncertain, human instinct and basic management training can cause leaders — out of fear of taking the wrong steps and unnecessarily making people anxious — to delay action and to downplay the threat until the situation becomes clearer. But behaving in this manner means failing the coronavirus

leadership test, because by the time the dimensions of the threat are clear, you're badly behind in trying to control the crisis. Passing that test requires leaders to act in an urgent, honest, and iterative fashion, recognizing that mistakes are inevitable and correcting course — not assigning blame — is the way to deal with them when they occur.

In a moment of tremendous ambiguity, Silver's decisive action — well before state governments began restricting public gatherings in the United States — set off a chain of events that almost certainly altered the course of the virus. Over a million fans would now avoid potential exposure at games. Moreover, the decision had a powerful ripple effect:

The suspension of the NCAA's historic "March Madness" college tournament; the National Hockey League (NHL), Major League Baseball (MLB), and other sports leagues halting their own operations; and the rescheduling of the Boston Marathon.

That this action happened in the sports arena may be material. Here was the NBA, an organization with more than \$8 billion in 2019 revenue, known for physical prowess and competitiveness, not excess caution, acting with what appeared at the time to be great caution and reserve.

It got people thinking.

But could a politician ever show similar courage in getting out ahead of the virus before its impact was widely apparent? In fact, that is exactly what happened in New Zealand. Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's response to the pandemic back on March 21 was bold *and* engendered public support. That day, Ardern delivered an eight-minute televised statement to the nation in which she announced a four-level Covid-19 alert system. Modeled on fire risk systems already in use in New Zealand, this familiar approach set clear guidelines for how the government would step up its response — and what would be asked of citizens as infection rates grew.

The prime minister's announcement, when New Zealand had only 52 confirmed cases, set the alert level at two, restricting some travel and urging people to limit contact. But when cases grew to 205 four days later, the alert system was raised to level four, triggering a nationwide lockdown. While her political peers — heads of state around the world — worried about their ability to maintain public support for sweeping restrictions, Ardern's actions showed that honesty and caring yield support. A national poll put her government at over 80% public approval as of March 27. And, although uncertainty remains high, as of April 7 the number of new cases in New Zealand had fallen for two consecutive days. The country reported only 54 cases on April 6 and only one Covid-19 death since the pandemic started, leading to the *Washington Post* headline: "New Zealand isn't just Flattening the Curve. It's Squashing it."

Importantly, Ardern's explicit step system meant that people knew in advance that escalation was coming. They knew what would be required of them — and they accepted the challenge.

How a message is delivered matters. Ardern's communication was clear, honest, and compassionate: It acknowledged the daily sacrifices to come and inspired people to forge ahead in bearing them together. Ardern closed her March 21 address by thanking New Zealanders for all they were about to do. And her powerful parting words were soon picked up around the globe as people looked for direction in the fog: "Please be strong, be kind, and unite against Covid-19."

What Ardern and Silver got right in March, before the situation was clear to much of the public, reveals a great deal about what good leadership looks like during this pandemic. Understanding what's required of leaders in this moment starts with appreciation for the type of problem this pandemic presented in its initial phases. When warning signs are fuzzy and potential harm could be large, leaders confront what management scholars call an ambiguous threat. Given the human desire to hope a threat is small, we are drawn to act as if that is factually the case. Fiascos ranging from NASA's Columbia Shuttle disaster in 2003 to the 2008 financial system collapse have brought into sharp relief the unique challenge that ambiguous threats pose to leaders: cognitive biases, dysfunctional group dynamics, and organizational pressures push them toward discounting the risk and delaying action, often to catastrophic ends.

It takes a unique kind of leadership to push against the natural human tendency to downplay and delay. Far too many leaders instead try to send upbeat messages assuring all is well — which, in the current tragedy, has unfortunately led to unnecessary lost life at a scale that may never be accurately counted. But this is by no means the only path for leaders to take. Building on the cases of Silver and Ardern, we distill four lessons for leaders in a novel crisis.

**Overcome Your Instincts So You Can Lead Effectively**

What's <i>instinctive</i> when facing uncertainty	What's <i>needed</i> in a crisis
Waiting for additional information	Acting with urgency
Downplaying the threat and withholding bad news	Communicating with transparency
Doubling down to explain your actions more clearly	Taking responsibility and focusing on solving problems
Staying the course	Engaging in constant updating

Source: Michaela J. Kerrissey and Amy C. Edmondson

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## 1. Act with urgency.

A well-documented and pernicious problem with any ambiguous threat is the (understandable) tendency to wait for more information and clarity. The risks of delaying decision-making are often invisible. But in a crisis, wasting vital time in the vain hope that greater clarity will prove no action is needed is dangerous — particularly in the face of a pandemic with an exponential growth rate, when each additional day of delay contributes even greater devastation than the last. Against the natural tendency toward delay, acting with urgency means leaders jump into the fray without all the information they would dearly like. Both Ardern and Silver acted early, well before others in similar circumstances and well before the future was clear. It was what Ardern publicly described as an explicit choice to “go hard and go early.”

## 2. Communicate with transparency.

Communicating bad news is a thankless task. Leaders who get out ahead risk demoralizing employees, customers, or citizens, threatening their popularity. It takes wisdom and some courage to understand that communicating with transparency is a vital antidote to this risk. As Ardern stated in her early national address:

*I understand that all of this rapid change creates anxiety and uncertainty. Especially when it means changing how we live. That's why today I am going to set out for you as clearly as possible, what you can expect as we continue to fight the virus together.*

Since that announcement, Ardern has delivered regular public addresses, including some in a sweatshirt recorded obviously from home. Silver similarly sent a barrage of memos throughout the NBA organization as his decision-making process unfolded. As reported on ESPN, 16 (yes, 16!) “Hiatus Memos” were delivered to the teams as of March 19.

Communicating with transparency means providing honest and accurate descriptions of reality — being as clear as humanly possible about what you know, what you anticipate, and what it means for people. It is crucial to convey your message in a way that people can understand, as Ardern did by echoing the familiar four-level alert system. But communication cannot be utterly devoid of hope or people will simply give in to despair. Somewhere in that communication must be a hopeful vision of the future toward which people can direct their energy, because without hope, resolve is impossible.

### **3. Respond productively to missteps.**

Because of the novelty and complexity of a pandemic — or any other large system failure — problems will arise regardless of how well a leader acts. How leaders respond to the inevitable missteps and unexpected challenges is just as important as how they first address the crisis.

First, they must not revert to defensiveness or blame when mistakes are made. Instead, they must stay focused on the goal and look ahead to continue solving the next and most pressing problems. For instance, when New York’s Mayor Bill de Blasio lambasted the unfairness of NBA players accessing tests that remained out of reach for the rest of America, Silver publicly acknowledged the criticism, accepted it as valid, and emphasized the (real) fundamental problem of the testing shortage — with an eye on the larger picture. He said, “I, of course, understand [de Blasio’s] point, and it is unfortunate that we are at this position in this society where it’s triage where it comes to testing. So, the fundamental issue is obviously that there are insufficient tests.”

In short, it is not our intention to suggest that the NBA’s response to the virus was perfect but rather to point out that Silver took the criticism in and kept focused on the key issue of fighting the pandemic and making tests more widely available. The important response to

any misstep is to listen, acknowledge, and orient everyone toward problem-solving.

#### **4. Engage in constant updating.**

An all-too-common misconception of good leadership is that a leader must be steady and unrelenting in staying the course. Certainly, steadiness is required in these times. But given the novelty and rapid evolution of the pandemic, it is wrong to think that the work of the leader is to set a course and stick to it. Leaders must constantly update their understanding of prior probabilities, even daily, deliberately using strategies to elicit new information and learn rapidly as events unfold and new information comes to light.

Doing this means relying on expert advisors and energetically seeking diverse opinions. Silver drew on a long and diverse list of advisors as he has made his way through this crisis: from the NBA's director of sports medicine, John DiFiori, to his colleagues based in China who saw the virus' early toll, to a former U.S. surgeon general, Vivek Murthy. A leader's advisory team in the face of an ambiguous threat may change over time, because new information often means new problems have surfaced and the necessary expertise will shift accordingly. Finding and leveraging the right people for evolving problems is part of the updating challenge.

#### **Tapping into Suffering to Build Meaning**

Perhaps Silver and Ardern's proactive responses were accidents of history rather than a special brilliance. When the first reports of the coronavirus reached Silver, he was writing a eulogy for his longtime mentor, former NBA Commissioner David Stern. It was also not long after former star player Kobe Bryant and eight others suddenly died in a helicopter crash. These events, although unrelated to Covid-19, may have put Silver in a reflective mood that helped him to see the emerging threat of the virus through a human lens. Similarly, Jacinda Ardern was feeling somber in March, which brought the one-year anniversary of the Christchurch mosque shootings that killed 51 people, the deadliest mass shooting in her country's history.

Most people in positions of authority have seen great suffering or experienced loss — or at least their advisors have — and yet far too many failed to decisively take potentially unpopular action in the critical days as the virus gained momentum. They might argue

that they were trying to remain professional: to stay rational and dispassionate, to keep their personal emotion at bay, and bide their time. But the cases of Ardern and Silver suggest an opposite approach.

We believe that leadership is strengthened by continually referring to the big picture as an anchor for meaning, resisting the temptation to compartmentalize or to consider human life in statistics alone.

Leadership in an uncertain, fast-moving crisis means making oneself available to feel what it is like to be in another's shoes — to lead with empathy. Perhaps in the coming weeks the unfortunate scale of this pandemic will make empathy easier for many leaders. But awful scale can also have a numbing effect. It will be incumbent on leaders to put themselves in another's suffering, to feel with empathy and think with intelligence, and then to use their position of authority to make a path forward for us all. Crises of historical proportion can make for leaders of historical distinction, but that is far from guaranteed.

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Zoltan Nyiri 23 days ago

Excellent recap, I'm a huge fan of the NBA, so Adam Silver's leadership does not surprise me at all. In fact, it wasn't the eulogy of David Stern or Kobe's death that prepared him for this covid-19 leadership. He was already mentored to be a great leader by the late David Stern. In fact, one of Adam Silver's first decisions showed his true leadership, someone who is able to make the right decisions in tough times.

<https://www.nba.com/clippers/news/nba-commissioner-adam-silver-bans-donald-sterling-life>

Also would like to share, that there are many companies out there with great leadership in such hard times, unfortunately not enough of them in such difficult time during covid-19. But Apple has done an incredible job of making excellent decisions to protect their employees and the customers, making difficult choices but the right ones for the people. Tim Cook is a similar leader in my view.

<https://www.theverge.com/2020/3/14/21179542/apple-closing-retail-stores-march-27-coronavirus>

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