

Style Matters

UNH research amidst COVID-19 finds leadership approach may impact crisis outcomes

Thursday, December 16, 2021

•
•
•



JENNIFER GRIFFITH, UNH ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF ORGANIZATIONAL BEHAVIOR AND MANAGEMENT.

As the saying goes, with great power comes great responsibility and new research shows that may have had significant meaning during the COVID-19 pandemic where varying responses from world leaders influenced infection outcomes. Researchers at the University of New Hampshire and the University of Nebraska at Omaha took a closer look at international leadership styles and found global leaders that had a

rational, problem-solving approach toward the crisis were associated with fewer country-wide infections.

“We found that differences in leadership sensemaking style significantly predicted case rates,” said [Jennifer Griffith](#), UNH associate professor of organizational behavior and management. “In short, how leaders process, categorize and interpret information can impact their own behavior, like wearing a mask, as well as the policy positions they take, like funding, and can in turn impact the behavior of those they govern.”

In their [study](#), recently published in the journal *Personality and Individual Differences*, the researchers looked at a sampling of 19 world leaders from the Group of Twenty, or G20, as well as 16 female Heads of State, to balance the sample group to include female leaders, for a total of 35 leaders. Weekly statements from the leaders concerning COVID-19 were collected from between Jan. 1 and June 1, 2020, via online searches, after each country had experienced its first case.

The content they analyzed showed that leaders that responded to the pandemic with a more pragmatic leadership style were more effective in dealing with the pandemic and governed countries that had lower rates of infection. Leaders who took a more charismatic approach, focusing on idealized visions of the future and maintaining a positive outlook, were associated with higher overall COVID-19 infection rates. The researchers say during the COVID-19 crisis, leaders with a pragmatic style were more malleable and able to problem solve during complex circumstances but those with a more charismatic style put too much emphasis on their message and goals, giving a false sense of security, rather than adapting to specific circumstances.

“This study contributes to a broader discussion regarding the so-called ‘real’ impact of leaders and leadership,” said Kelsey Medeiros, UNO assistant professor of business management and lead author. “We have demonstrated that public health outcomes can be significantly altered as a result of differences in leadership style and that such effects are not isolated to a specific population or context.”

The researchers point out that this is some of the first work to demonstrate how outcomes can change if the leaders themselves change, suggesting that leaders who are uninformed or overly obstinate in their approach may pose an even greater risk to those that follow them when faced with crisis conditions.

Co-authors on the paper include Matthew Crayne, University of Albany; Jay Hardy III, Oregon State University; and Adam Damadzic, UNO.

- WRITTEN BY:

[Robbin Ray '82](#) | Communications and Public Affairs | robbin.ray@unh.edu | 603-862-4864

PHOTOGRAPHER:

[Jeremy Gasowski](#) | Communications and Public Affairs | jeremy.gasowski@unh.edu | 603-862-4465



University of New Hampshire

UNH Today is produced for the UNH community and for friends of UNH.
The stories are written by the staff of [UNH Communications and Public Affairs](#).
Email us: unhtoday.editor@unh.edu.

[MANAGE YOUR SUBSCRIPTION](#) [CONTACT US](#)

Like us on Facebook

Follow us on Twitter

Follow us on YouTube

Follow us on Instagram

Find us on LinkIn

UNH Today RSS feeds

UNH Today • UNH Main Directory: 603-862-1234
Copyright © 2022 • TTY Users: 7-1-1 or 800-735-2964 (Relay NH)
[USNH Privacy Policies](#) • [USNH Terms of Use](#) • [ADA Acknowledgement](#)