

UNH Research Amidst COVID-19 Finds Leadership Style May Impact Crisis Outcomes

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MEDIA RELATIONS

DURHAM, N.H.— 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 January 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.

Located in one of America’s best cities to live, work and learn, the [University of Nebraska at Omaha](#) (UNO) is Nebraska’s premier metropolitan university. With more than 15,000 students enrolled in 200-plus programs of study, UNO is recognized nationally for its online education, graduate education, military friendliness and community engagement efforts. Founded in 1908, UNO has served learners of all backgrounds for more than 100 years and is dedicated to another century of excellence both in the classroom and in the community.

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with an award-winning faculty in top-ranked programs in business, engineering, law, health and human services, liberal arts and the sciences across more than 200 programs of study. A Carnegie Classification R1 institution, UNH partners with NASA, NOAA, NSF and NIH, and received \$260 million in competitive external funding in FY21 to further explore and define the frontiers of land, sea and space.

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