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**COVID-19 crisis: A call for responsible leadership research**

Anne S. Tsui

Arizona State University and University of Notre Dame

In times of crisis such as wars, hurricanes, earthquakes, or pandemics like the one we are experiencing now, leaders play an especially important role, since their decisions and actions may have life or death consequences. The coronavirus pandemic presents a critical challenge to leadership at all levels and in all organizations. How are leaders in government, business, non-governmental organizations, civil society, and communities responding to this public health crisis? What are the right actions to take? What is a responsible decision?

The media is encouraging policy makers and citizens to listen to the scientists for advice and guidance. As reported widely, medical and public health researchers are front and center in providing credible information and evidence-based recommendations. Psychiatrists and mental health specialists, based on accumulated knowledge from past research, are offering suggestions on how to adjust to new work and family arrangements brought on by work displacement and social distancing. Having been involved in promoting [responsible research in business and management](http://www.rrbm.network/) for the past few years, I asked myself, what can business research offer to this major disruption to businesses, organizations, and workers? What would or can a responsible researcher do to address a global healthcare crisis which is affecting millions of workers who are told to work at home or to go home without a guarantee of pay for an unknown period of time? What would be our advice to government and business leaders during this unprecedented disruption?

**Range of leadership responses so far**

As I move my attention from research papers to the world outside my comfortable office at home, I see government leaders struggling to make the right decisions for their citizens, responding, on the one hand, to the moral imperative of saving lives and, on the other, to minimizing economic hardship that mitigating measures such as social distancing have caused.

This tension (and others) defines a range of possible leadership responses, many of which appear to be responsible. Some businesses are stepping up to address the pressing needs and to ease the pain of workers. For example, a couple of well-known, large breweries are making and donating hand sanitizers. Several auto manufacturers are retooling to make ventilators. Key fashion designers are making face masks. An executive from a major French retail corporation shared with me his company’s action, “Our business with (Company XXX) at the airports are completely shut in many countries including here in the Middle East. Zero Sales and all its staff were sent home, but we decided on full pay for all employees. This is not their fault and as a business we need to fund this cost and find other ways to make the ends meet.” A U.S. healthcare products distribution company (where my daughter works) is giving non bonus eligible employees $1000 on top of their overtime pay for their extra hard work to meet the increasing demands. At the same time, businesses in the United States collectively laid off more than 10 million workers based on unemployment compensation claims in the first two weeks of the social distancing mandate that began in mid-March 2020.

At the individual level, healthcare professionals are choosing to risk their lives to care for the coronavirus patients. The media reported that thousands of retired medical personnel responded to the call for selfless service. Yet at the same time, there are some business leaders engaging in price gouging or other illicit actions for personal economic gains. There have been a range of responsible and irresponsible leadership actions in response to this human tragedy in all the societies. What are more or less responsible decisions by leaders in government, business and otherwise, to deal with this unprecedented challenge? What might explain the variations in responsible leadership actions?

**COVID-19 responses among academic professionals**

Medical and public health scientists are in high gear to seek an understanding of this virus and to find a vaccine or cure. Social scientists have opportunities to study the effects of pandemic mitigation measures such as social distancing and work at home arrangements on individuals and communities. What does COVID-19 mean for social scientists in business schools? As business researchers, how can we contribute to understanding the effect of this pandemic on organizations in all sectors and leadership decisions and actions at all levels? Some academics have spoken out. A few economic scholars explained the costs of the pandemic and associated measures taken to restrict the spread of the virus (see Note 1 and Note 2). Notably, a group of sustainability scholars have created a forum for scholars to share their knowledge on this crisis through reflection papers (Note 3).

In general, the management literature is rather thin about (responsible) leadership during a crisis. The sparse literature on “responsible leadership” that appeared in the last two decades is mostly conceptual or normative with few empirical tests. It focuses on the business leader’s role in corporate social responsibility (e.g., Waldman & Balven, 2014) or on addressing stakeholder needs beyond shareholder returns (e.g., Maak & Pless, 2006). There is an interesting study of 39 United States Presidents (House, Spangler, & Woycke, 1991), which found several personal traits, e.g., needs for power, behavioral charisma, and the existence of a crisis during the presidency to be associated with presidential performance. Though this is not a direct study of responsible presidential leadership, research on political leaders may offer valuable insight on responsible leadership with serious consequences for the nation. There is a critical need for systematic research on the nature, the antecedents, the consequences, and the contextual boundaries of responsible leadership in all types of organizations, public and private, in times of peace and crisis.

The corporate awakening to move from shareholder primacy toward stakeholder and societal responsibility (e.g., see Blackrock CEO Larry Fink’s letter to CEOs, Note 4; and the redefinition of “corporate purpose” by the Business Roundtable, Note 5) was the impetus of a special issue on “Responsible Leadership in China and Beyond” for *Management and Organization Review* (Note 6). The idea of this special issue was first discussed by a group of organizational scholars (including myself) in August 2019. We wrote the draft Call for Proposals in December, and the final version was completed in early January, before we learned of the outbreak of the coronavirus in China. Given the scant knowledge on responsible leadership and given its importance, in both time of peace and time of war, we hope this special issue will encourage management scholars to contribute knowledge on this leadership imperative through timely responsible research.

**The contribution of responsible research**

As we witness different forms of leadership actions unfolding in dealing with this pandemic, there is a correspondent responsibility for business researchers to contribute *evidence-based* *knowledge* on responsible leadership in times of crisis, relative to that in times of normalcy. How and why are responsible leadership practices, similar or different in various organizational contexts, levels, industries, sectors, regions, or times of crisis? How do responsible leaders embrace action and compassion, focusing on alleviating the sufferings of those directly affected, without losing sight of the needs and longer-term consequences for the larger community? How do they respond to conflicting information and priorities? Who should they consult or involve in making timely decisions since time is the essence in crisis situation? In general, what types of responsible leadership practices contribute to the well-being of citizens and resilience of societies to weather all forms of challenges and adversities? Is responsible leadership different in form and substance, relative to responsible leadership in normal or peaceful times? Research can help us to identify, select, or develop leaders who will lead responsibly in both ordinary times and times of crisis.

The Responsible Research in Business and Management ([RRBM](http://www.rrbm.network/)) movement reminds us of our responsibility to produce credible knowledge that is potentially, if not immediately, useful to solve the great societal challenges of our times. As responsible researchers, we can contribute by seeking understanding and providing science-based solutions to pressing problems in the world. We need to ask critical questions regarding our choices of research problems to study. Is this project related to any social problems in our societies? Who will benefit from the findings of this research? What might be some unintended consequences, if the conclusions from our research are flawed? The RRBM position paper (cRRBM, 2017) offer seven principles to guide in the design of responsible research studies. In Tsui (2019) I explain how we can design responsible leadership studies with guidance of the seven responsible research principles.

We also need to develop a sense of awareness of the values that are influencing our choices of study topics, theories, and research methods. Is it expediency? Is it ease of publication? Is it a feeling of insecurity? Whom are we doing research for (Davis, 2015)? In Tsui (2016), I discuss how instrumental values have been driving business schools research priorities. The focus is on publishing as many papers as possible in select journals. Consequently, there has been less attention paid to substantive ideas in the papers or whether research makes any contribution to solving real business or societal problems. In another paper (Tsui, 2009) I explain how the current research culture constrains our freedom to work on problems that we have passion for.

As the pandemic spreads all over the world, I am reminded of the fragility of human life and how unprepared some societies are. I am even more resolved that business research can contribute to alleviating some of these sufferings and can help organizations become stronger and kinder. I hope this pandemic is a wake-up call for business researchers, as much as it is for leaders in government, business, communities and universities. As a community of scholars, we have the power to reclaim our freedom and respond to the call to be responsible social scientists so that we can realize our dreams and achieve our aspirations to contribute to healthy, just, and thriving societies. History taught us that after every major global disaster, the world is better. I deeply hope this pandemic is reminding us that life is too precious to waste on writing research papers that do not matter. Let us exercise responsible leadership ourselves by studying and advancing responsible leadership, as well as all other valuable topics, to contribute to the making of a better world post-COVID-19.

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**Notes**

1. <https://economics.sas.upenn.edu/pier/working-paper/2020/human-mobility-restrictions-and-spread-novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov-china>

2. <https://www.london.edu/faculty-and-research/wheeler-institute-for-business-and-development>

3. These papers can be found on both the Academy of Management’s [ONE](http://one.aom.org/covid-19-insights-from-business-sustainability-scholars) division and the [RRBM](https://rrbm.network/readings/blog/covid-19-insights-from-business-sustainability-scholars/) websites. The topics include “resilience in uncertain times (Linnenluecke), “a behavioral corporate social responsibility perspective for understanding COVID-19” (Aguinis), “a call for rapid responsible innovation by companies” (Gutierrez-Gutierrez, Castillo & Montiel), “coronavirus and global supply chain disruption” (Dolsak & Prakash), “does the coronavirus offer lessons for climate change?” (Bansal), and many more.

4. <https://www.businessroundtable.org/business-roundtable-redefines-the-purpose-of-a-corporation-to-promote-an-economy-that-serves-all-americans>

5. <https://www.blackrock.com/corporate/investor-relations/2019-larry-fink-ceo-letter>

6. Visit [www.rrbm.network](http://www.rrbm.network) or [www.iacmr.org](http://www.iacmr.org) for the Call for Proposals to this special issue.

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