



Sensitive is the new strength.

In a time of multiple crises, leaders are taking on a new role - being human.

By: Dave Boerger

Steady. Rock solid. A pillar of strength.

Traditionally, these were the defining characteristics of a good leader, especially in times of crisis, as exemplified by Winston Churchill, Margaret Thatcher, Jack Welch and even Patriot coach Bill Belichick.

But today, as the COVID pandemic continues to take lives across the globe, it's hard to find a leader who isn't reaching for a Kleenex.

As The New York Times [reported](#), Governor Charlie Baker of Massachusetts broke down while speaking about the death of his best friend's mother. Mayor Eric Garcetti of Los Angeles choked back tears while [discussing the coronavirus's impact on his city](#). Even Mark Meadows, President Trump's chief of staff, has been [crying frequently](#) in meetings with White House staff.



Not so long ago, this was unacceptable behavior, but for different reasons for men and women. When Patricia Schroeder, a former congresswoman from Colorado, [broke into tears](#), it cut short her presidential bid in 1987. With this in mind, Hillary Clinton often seemed to err on the side of cool rigidity to avoid being stereotyped as an “overly emotional” woman.

Men have been wary to cry in public - unless it's due to a heroic act or sporting loss - ever since stoicism became valued in the 19th century. But these are unprecedented times. The global pandemic has not only killed hundreds of thousands, it has caused tremendous job loss, with millions more worried they will be next on the chopping block. Working from home, either in isolation or with whining

kids, has left nearly everyone with frayed nerves. A leader who doesn't show emotion at a time like this risks appearing tone deaf.

No room for buzz

"A lot of what leadership has been focused on in the past is cheesy words like 'vision' and 'passion' that don't really mean anything," said Karla McLaren, an award-winning author and social science researcher. "Before the pandemic, empathy was a buzz word rather than a real word. But now, being a real person is important for leaders, and understanding how much change and difficulty people are going through."



Loren Margolis, an executive leadership coach based in New York City, offers New York Governor Andrew Cuomo and his daily pandemic news briefings as an example of a leader who radically pivoted his style - and continues to receive high marks for it. "The previous era was driven by a different kind of leadership: Command and control, contain your emotions. This isn't personal, this is business," said Loren. "But Cuomo was in front of us daily, saying that one of the most important parts of getting through this is love. And you think about Cuomo, this rough and tumble, win-at-all-costs guy, talking about love. That's his version of compassion."

Governor Cuomo himself said as much during a recent radio interview, when he compared himself to his father, who also served as Governor of New York. "Howard Stern asked me if I cried during this. And I said yes I have, about the death toll. It's very difficult for me to deal with on every level. But my father would never say he cried. You know, he would not do intimate emotional communication. That is not what my father did. He was very private that way."

Black Lives Matter

Of course, 2020 has not only been the year of the pandemic, but also the year of George Floyd. The heart-wrenching videos captured as he lay dying under the knee of a police officer left many shaken, including corporate leaders.

Days after the first Floyd-related Black Lives Matter protests, Verizon CEO Hans Vestberg addressed racial injustice in a prepared statement on a webcast to his senior leaders. Standing alone in front of the camera, he shared that he had never experienced the type of harassment and prejudice that so many of his black employees had endured on a regular basis. He was visibly shaken, and often had to stop reading as he struggled to regain his composure. When it came time to read the



statement again for an employee webcast an hour later, he admitted he didn't think he could physically get through it a second time, and asked that a video of the first reading be replayed instead.

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This wasn't the first time Vestberg had wept in front of his employees. Two months earlier, he had also brushed away tears when announcing the first pandemic-related death of a Verizon employee.

Instead of appearing weak, Hans' openness endeared him to employees. "I was moved by his emotions," said Jackie Eagle, a Verizon executive assistant from New Jersey. "I thought that seeing him in that way showed his human side. His sincerity was touching. A CEO with compassion is a good thing."

"I think employees appreciate and trust a leader who demonstrates vulnerability and empathy with authenticity," said Jon Asmussen, a Verizon Network Engineering employee from California. "Hans has done that."

Of course, consistent and transparent communication also helps. During the first months of the pandemic, Hans and Verizon Chief Human Resources Christy Pambianchi updated employees daily via the Verizon news show [Up To Speed](#). Despite stores being closed, the company avoided layoffs by retraining retail associates as customer service reps and other work-from-home positions. When Forbes rated the 100 biggest companies on their response to the pandemic, Verizon came in at number one.

Less mouth, more ears

Leaders are often hired or promoted because of their public speaking skills. But in another 2020 twist, managers have had to learn to stop talking.

"With Black Lives Matter, as a senior leader, you have to have an awareness," said Loren. "You have to listen not only to what is going on in the world today, but also to what's going on inside yourself, to your own unconscious bias. What did your parents teach you in what is now an outdated time? And you have to do all of this before you open your mouth."

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Leading with empathy is part of a larger shift as leaders treat their employees more as equals than subordinates. "There used to be a case made for rigid hierarchical leadership structures," said Karla. "But what we're seeing now is with the pandemic you need flatter, supple networks that are more

person to person, rather than one above the rest. Companies were only holding on to hierarchy because that is what had been done in the past. I'm hoping it falls away for good."

If leaders can make the change, their organizations stand to reap the benefits. As Paul Tufano, CEO of AmeriHealth Caritas, explained in a McKinsey [report](#). "If CEOs can step into a ministerial role – extending hands virtually, truly listening, relating to and connecting with people where they are – there is enormous potential to inspire people and strengthen bonds and loyalties within the company."

You don't need tears to show empathy



Perhaps the best example of empathetic leadership comes from one of the youngest leaders in the world. Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, 39, has quietly led New Zealand to nearly eradicate the coronavirus. However, her [greatest moment](#) may have come after the brutal mass shootings at mosques in Christchurch in 2019. When Ardern went to visit the sites, she didn't make any speeches. Instead, she donned a black headscarf, listened to the relatives and mourned along with them.

In her address to Parliament later that week, Ardern opened with the Arabic greeting "as-salamu alaykum," meaning "peace be upon you." A week later, women across New Zealand showed solidarity with Muslims by wearing headscarves.

The final tally

Fifty-five die in a mass shooting. 1,000 die from the virus. 20,000 are laid off. The statistics stream at us from our screens every day.

Whether you're a member of a religious group in New Zealand or working for a large corporation in the United States, you want to be seen as more than a number. You want to be counted as a person. Having powerful leaders who think and act like caring human beings, who know that you and your loved ones matter, is more than important. Increasingly, with so much changing every day, it's all we have.

"It takes strength to be an empathetic leader," said Prime Minister Ardern.

When a leader hears stories of personal tragedy, especially day after day, it's a heavy emotional load that would be difficult for anyone to bear.

But the hard truth is that the tears of a governor or CEO proves they are not just hearing or reading the news, they are feeling it and suffering alongside those in their community, and that provides much needed comfort for the rest of us.