Chapter 8
Successful First-Time Political Leaders and Their Response to COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

History is witness to many first-time transformational leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr who garnered mass movements for the fight to their country's freedom. A first-time leader shows high levels of commitment and a strong desire to make a positive difference to society. However, the abilities and strengths of a leader is truly tested during crises. The nature of a crisis is its suddenness, uncertainty, and catastrophic impact, and hence, an opportunity to showcase innate leadership characteristics. Some examples of successful first-time political leaders who received accolades across the globe for their handling of the recent COVID-19 crisis are from developed nations like New Zealand, Finland, Australia, and a developing nation, India. It is in this context that the leadership styles, behavioral patterns and decision-making abilities of these first time political leaders is analysed with special reference to their response to the COVID-19 crisis. This analysis may enable other leaders in replicating these behaviours to succeed as leaders in crisis situations.

INTRODUCTION

Ralph Waldo Emerson's famous quote on leadership states "Do not follow where the path may lead. Go instead where there is no path and leave a trail." This is especially true of first time leaders. A successful leader is someone who can create a strong sense of common purpose, lead decisively and galvanize people to act towards the common goal. A leader is expected to have many characteristics and competencies.

Even as the timeless debate on whether leaders are born or made continues, leadership theories are predominantly divided into three categories: Trait theories of leadership, behavioral theories of leadership and Situational theories of leadership. The book, "How Remarkable Women Lead: The Breakthrough Model for Work and Life" by Joanna Barsh, Geoffrey Lewis, and Susie Cranston talks about the concept of centred leadership and the five capabilities that are at the heart of it: finding meaning in work, converting emotions such as fear or stress into opportunity, leveraging connections and community, acting in the face of risk, and sustaining the energy that is the life force of change (Barsh et al, 2009).

History indicates that first time leaders like Mahatma Gandhi who led the Non- Violent Freedom movement in India, Martin Luther King Jr who pioneered the African-American civil rights movement in USA, Lech Walesa, trade union activist who galvanized the Solidarity revolution in Poland and Nelson Mandela who marshaled the anti-apartheid revolution in South Africa have exhibited transformational and charismatic leadership qualities. Transformational leaders integrate creative insight, persistence and energy, intuition and sensitivity to the needs of others to forge "the strategy culture" alloy for their organization (Bass, 1993). This calls for transformational leaders to prioritise the needs of their followers. A first time leader shows high levels of commitment, has a strong desire to make a difference and leave a lasting impact on the world. However, the most impressive quality of their leadership is immense courage in the face of adversity and crisis.

The nature of a crisis is its suddenness, uncertainty and catastrophic impact. It is an opportunity for a leader to view the situation in its entirety, face it with determination, and envision a future beyond it. A crisis often develops exponentially and a linear response to it will only aggravate the situation further. Crises have various causes, play out differently, draw disparate reactions, and affect societies in different ways. Crisis is looked at as an important part of the institutionalization process and if not immediately resolved may lead to loss of societal and political support (Boin & Christensen, 2008). Handling crises requires collaborative leadership with clear and consistent communication. It calls for tenacity and firm decision making abilities. It needs followers to have unwavering faith in the leader and heed instructions obediently. Effective crisis leadership requires recognizing a threat, taking action steps to mitigate it, dealing with the consequences of the action and then most importantly establishing a sense of normalcy once the situation is under control (Boin, et.al 2010)

The Covid-19 pandemic is a global crisis that has crippled economies the world over. It calls for long term sustainable solutions that save the lives of people and at the same time safeguard livelihoods to promote economic growth. In the face of such a crisis people look up to their country leaders to show the way forward. Political leaders/ Heads of State are the individuals who have to take the lead during such crises to create a mass impact. It is an opportunity for such leaders to unleash their innate leadership skills. These are situations which will be a part of history forever. Few first time political leaders have risen to the occasion while some of them have faltered. For the ones who have faltered, their country and its people have had to bear the consequences of the decisions they have taken in crisis times. Leaders who chose bold and sustainable strategies to curb the ill-effects of the pandemic and restore the economy will remain in public memory for a long time. Future leaders will learn from these examples and emulate these behaviors.

A first time leader, Jacinda Arden, Prime Minister of New Zealand has received accolades for the manner in which she led her country out of the pandemic. She urged the country's citizens to "Unite Against Covid-19," and repeatedly called the country "our team of five million" demonstrating a team spirit to fight the pandemic. Taiwan ramped up domestic face-mask production to ensure local supply, rolled out island wide testing for coronavirus and many strict measures to control the pandemic under

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