

Study highlights key leadership practices guiding New Zealand's COVID-19 success

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Dr Suze Wilson. Credit: Massey University

A recently published study by a leadership scholar at Massey University, Dr. Suze Wilson, has identified a set of key leadership practices deployed by Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern and her Government in the

country's successful fight against COVID-19.

Dr. Wilson undertook a detailed examination of the Ardern-led Government's [leadership](#) approach to the [pandemic](#) between January and May, and her findings were recently published in the UK based academic journal Leadership.

Dr. Wilson, a senior lecturer at Massey Business School, formulated her findings into a 'pandemic leadership model', which she says can be adopted by any political, community or [business leader](#) no matter the state of their locale's battle against COVID-19.

"Through close observation and analysis of the Ardern government's approach, I firstly found that its highly effective leadership of the pandemic has as its core purpose the aim of minimising harm to lives and livelihoods. This purpose has global relevance to all leaders involved in grappling with the effects of COVID-19.

"Adopting the aim of minimising harm to lives and livelihoods as one's purpose, gives leaders a guiding light to help navigate through the pandemic," says Dr. Wilson. "It's the foundation for effective pandemic leadership". Dr. Wilson says that having this clarity of purpose aids in garnering follower support and provides a yardstick against which possible actions can be judged as to their merits or effectiveness."

The pandemic leadership model comprises three key bundles of leadership practices driving the achievement of that purpose—being led by expertise, mobilising collective effort and enabling coping.

"Being led by expertise means leaders accepting they aren't subject matter experts on every aspect of what this pandemic involves. Hence, leaders must put ego aside and be willing to seek and listen to expert advice, follow the science and use facts and evidence to guide their

decision-making. This is critical to effective pandemic leadership," says Dr. Wilson.

"Mobilising collective effort involves informing, educating and uniting people to adopt those actions needed to minimise harm to lives and livelihoods. When communicating what's being asked of people, leaders should pull no punches and provide clear direction. However, this must be balanced with a focus on explaining why these actions matter and conveying empathy for their disruptive effects, otherwise people will just feel like they're being issued orders. Addressing practical concerns, avoiding defensiveness when questioned and soliciting feedback are also key leadership practices that aid in mobilising collective effort because they demonstrate to people that leaders are genuinely concerned for and interested in their needs and views."

"Enabling coping involves leaders taking actions that help people to plan ahead, to build knowledge and skills relevant for surviving the disruption of a pandemic and to make sense of what is going on. Fostering kindness also matters, as kindness helps to ease the distress the pandemic creates. Finally, leaders need to foster creative responses to the disruptive effects of the pandemic, both encouraging and role modelling new ways of carrying on with life and work in a pandemic."

Combined, Dr. Wilson says all these practices help leaders in taking suitable steps to address the pandemic, while simultaneously building people's trust in their competence and commitment to act in the best interests of those they lead. The study provides examples of each of these practices as used by Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern and her Government.

Dr. Wilson's study is one of a series of studies by leadership scholars from several countries examining leadership in the pandemic, each of which have recently been published in the U.K.-based academic journal

Leadership.

More information: Suze Wilson. Pandemic leadership: Lessons from New Zealand's approach to COVID-19, *Leadership* (2020). [DOI: 10.1177/1742715020929151](https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715020929151)

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