Perspectives on Global Leadership and the COVID-19 Crisis

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1) Do you have any sense of the impact your perspective had on the field of global leadership or beyond or on individuals or organizations?

I wrote my reflections on the early stages of the pandemic in March 2020, when the UK was just four days into its first national lockdown (Bolden, 2020a). At that point, whilst relatively little was known about the virus, it was already clear that this was a momentous situation that would have a lasting impact on how we live our lives and lead our organisations and societies.

Within the article I highlighted five main themes that I felt characterised the challenges and implications of Covid-19 for leadership research, education, and practice. Whilst I would not seek to claim personal impact from my work, looking back I believe that each of the themes outlined in the paper have proven to be highly relevant to leadership theory, policy and practice both during and post pandemic.

The ability of governments and organisations to create and sustain a compelling sense of *shared purpose* has proved integral to their ability to implement and maintain the public health measures required to contain the virus (Jetten et al., 2020). *Collective leadership*, whereby individuals and communities stepped in to address the void left by formally appointed leaders has also proven essential (Kars -Unluoglu et al., 2022). The significance of *systems change* and collective *sensemaking* have characterised effective leadership within the complex and uncertain context of a pandemic (Angeli and Montefusco, 2020). And the argument for a *place-based leadership* approach has become ever more convincing in response to varying local conditions and needs (Sutherland et al., 2022).

2) You wrote your original reflection in the early days of the pandemic. If you were writing today, is there anything you would change or add to your piece? What did you get right or wrong, with the benefit of hindsight? What else can we learn from Covid that would benefit the field of global leadership?

Something that I did not explore in the original article was the disproportionate impact of Covid-19 on disadvantaged individuals and communities. Highlighting the interconnection between health, economic and social factors, several authors have argued that this was a

syndemic rather than a pandemic (Horton, 2020). The prevalence of *systemic inequality* became headline news during the Black Lives Matter protests in June/July 2020 and in my own city of Bristol led to the toppling of the statue of Edward Colston, a renowned slave trader, that had stood pride of place in the city centre for over 120 years (see Bolden, 2020b). As we rebuild and learn the lessons of Covid-19 these issues need to be front and centre in our minds - requiring *compassionate and inclusive leadership* that makes time and space for much needed reconciliation and recovery (Bolden, 2022).

Another theme that I did not explore in the original article was the significance of *digital leadership*. Though the pandemic we have all become familiar with different ways of working – including the ubiquitous Zoom and Teams meetings. Whilst technology has facilitated the transition to remote working, however, there are concerning accounts of the growth of a surveillance culture that undermines dignity, privacy and trust. The return to the office also poses challenges, with new expectations around hybrid and flexible working at the same time as some leaders and organisations are demanding people come back on site. Looking forward, Covid has fundamentally transformed our relationship to technology and patterns of work - the savvy leader would be wise to learn from this.

Finally, I did not give much consideration to the topic of *crisis leadership*. The leadership styles that emerged and were effective through the early stages of the pandemic differ in some significant ways from the leadership required to facilitate the recovery and rebuilding required as we transition into a post-pandemic environment. Arguably many organisations and governments remain stuck in crisis-response mode and are struggling to (re)establish appropriate democratic and participative ways of working.

3) Did your participation in this collaborative paper have any impact on you personally? For example, did it change the way you teach, influence what you are researching today, get you promoted and put you in a higher income bracket (just kidding), etc.?

As director of a university-based leadership centre I felt compelled to comment on what was happening during the Covid-19 pandemic. The blog post from which my contribution to the *Advances in Global Leadership* paper was taken was one of the first times I had publicly applied my knowledge of leadership to a real-world crisis. Since then I have written several more blog posts and been appointed as a Fellow of the International Leadership Association

to contribute to their blog on *Leadership for the Greater Good* - https://ilaglobalnetwork.org/blog/.

I also found the opportunity to conduct applied research for a range of organisations on people's experiences of working and leading through the pandemic and the implications for leadership and organisation development. This has been moving and emotive work – with many participants finding it cathartic to share their experiences in a safe and supportive environment. The use of online platforms for hosting interviews and focus groups has proven highly effective and enabled a broader reach than would otherwise have been the case.

Similarly, I have developed my capacity for developing and delivering online leadership and management education, including the opportunity for my students to engage directly with cohorts from around the world. Whilst the pandemic has had a devastating effect for many, for me at least it has led to a renewed sense of purpose and commitment to leadership research, education and engagement that drives a positive change in the world – and for that I am thankful.

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