

Five Keys To Decisive Crisis Leadership

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United Kingdom: 62% in the U.K. do not believe their government acted fast enough to tackle the spread of COVID-19, and overall public disapproval of the government's handling rose from 26 to 30% in April.

France: Trust in the government's effective handling of COVID-19 fell from 55% to 39% between March 19 and April 21

United States: 60% say they trust the information from President Trump on COVID-19 "not at all" or "not very much."

New Zealand: 85% say they approve their government's response to COVID-19; and national pride is up from 47% to 62%

How and why is New Zealand such a positive outlier? What is the government doing to earn such high approval ratings? The answer can be summed up in one quote from the 39-year-old Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern: "Decisive action – going hard and going early, helped to stamp out the worst of the virus."

When New Zealand announced on March 14th that anyone entering the country needs to self-isolate for two weeks, they had only 6 cases and no deaths. On March 19th when they completely banned foreigners from entering, they had only 28 cases and no deaths yet. At the time, these were some of the toughest measures imposed anywhere in the world. Finally, on March 25th when they announced a full lockdown, a vast majority of Kiwis cooperated and responded favorably.

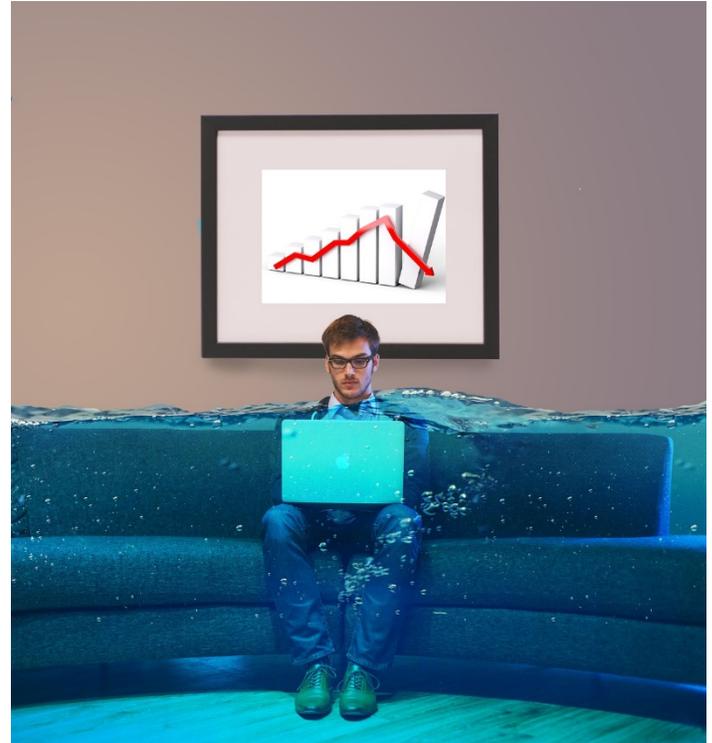


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In my 2017 book *Open Source Leadership*, I argued that in today's 24/7 connected and transparent life, the most successful form of leadership will be Positive Autocracy. I know the word autocracy conjures a whole lot of negative images, but 75% of the 16,000 people in 28 countries we surveyed agreed that it was needed. The key here is positive autocracy. A positive autocrat is not a ruthless dictator who does not listen to or collaborate with others. Under positive autocracy, shared values and purpose are non-negotiable, and the leader is strongly autocratic about them. For everything else, he is benevolent, collaborative, humble and caring. Jacinda Ardern is no exception. She can take decisive action without worrying about her approval ratings because she runs her government with a framework of values and purpose that most Kiwis relate positively to. They have so much faith in their leader that when she acts in a somewhat autocratic manner to tackle a massive crisis, they let her. Unlike in some other countries, there were no protests against the lockdown in New Zealand.

Singapore's former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew was another great example someone who had earned his people's permission to be a positive autocratic.

So, what is positive autocracy and how to practice it? There are five keys:

1. **Earn the right to use autocratic leadership:** Convince stakeholders that your sole purpose is to create a better future for them, and that you will never give up on trying to do so. Once you earn their trust in this way, they will willingly allow you some autocracy.
2. **Master the dance of the naked autocrat:** Today, all our words and actions are fully visible to everyone. Nothing is private or secret anymore. In this sense, we are all naked. A positive autocrat in this environment is autocratic about his values and purpose, yet humble and respectful with people at all times. And yes, these two seemingly opposite actions can be done at the same time.
3. **Provide Freedom within a Framework:** As long as people do not violate the framework of shared values and purpose, allow them the freedom to operate as they wish. Lead with values rather than rules and regulations.
4. **Listen, learn and reflect continuously:** While you must stay firm on your core framework and not give in easily, you need to also remain open to new ideas, and be prepared to change your thinking if there's compelling evidence.
5. **Forgive more often:** Finally, positive autocrats have enough inner strength to be able to forgive unconditionally. They do not need revenge or continued hatred to placate their ego.

The Five Keys to Positive Autocracy



This is not the first time Jacinda Ardern has “gone hard and gone early.” On March 15th, 2019, when 28-year-old gunman Brenton Tarrant conducted consecutive mass shootings at two mosques killing 51 people and injuring 49, Ardern wasted no time in acting decisively. “Our gun laws will change, now is the time... People will be seeking change, and I am committed to that.... There have been attempts to change our laws in 2005, 2012 and after an inquiry in 2017. Now is the time for change,” she announced. On 20 March 2019, Ardern announced that all military style semi-automatics and assault rifles would be banned. The first step in this process was taken on 21 March by reclassifying most semi-automatic firearms as "military style semi-automatic firearms" for the purpose of the Arms Act 1983, pursuant to section 74A(c) of the statute

The line between positive autocracy and dictatorship is thin, and easy to cross. Two words of caution:

1. Some autocracy is essential in times of crisis. However, unless you have earned the right over years of noble and honest action, the empowered ordinary people of today will not allow you the license to autocratic action when you need it the most. So, work on earning trust with everything you do, all the time.
2. If you believe very strongly in your values and purpose, it is easy to get carried away. As a positive autocrat, it is important to have enough people around you who can hold up the mirror and tell you the truth. And you must develop deep inner strength to be able to hear it.

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