

Is Covid-19 the tipping point for accelerating female leadership in business?

By [Maja Smith](#)

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Empathy has long been touted as a social currency, with customer experience (CX) professionals referring to it as the key to delivering excellent customer service. Leadership training and HR departments talk about the need for empathy in people management, and marketing and PR departments do their utmost to demonstrate all the good their organisation is doing in an effort to showcase a corporate culture of care.



Photo by Rebrand Cities from [Pexels](#).

But never before has empathy - and the outward display thereof - been more important than in the Covid-19 world. Because for the first time, this elusive 'soft skill' has demonstrated hard-core results.

Empathy leadership

Jacinta Ardern, New Zealand's Prime Minister, has based her country's highly successful and widely applauded response to Covid-19 on honesty and empathy. Taiwan's Tsai Ing-Wen fostered an environment of collaboration between all sectors of society that saw the country prevent a major Covid-19 outbreak despite its proximity to China.

Chancellor Angela Merkel has led Germany with empathy and transparency for years, calling for social cohesion when other European countries were closing their borders to refugees. She continues to do the same now, and her country is the first of Europe's biggest economies to begin emerging from Covid-19. Ardern, Merkel and Ing-Wen have displayed leadership behaviours that engender trust, commitment and solidarity. Their people have felt simultaneously taken care of, and led. Empathetic leadership therefore has not only resonated on an emotional level, but it has delivered results.



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In business too, leaders are under increasing pressure to speak, behave and act with empathy and transparency. Pre-Covid, empathy, along with transparent and honest communication, was a 'tick in the box' – something we'd say we were

working on but never really prioritising. Why? Because it didn't contribute to the bottom line the way a more authoritarian leadership style may have done in the short term. Empathy was perceived as weakness, or 'sensitivity' - neither of which had a place in big business.

Empathy comes more naturally to women

But now the world is different. And who better to lead this new world than those people to whom empathy comes naturally? We have seen many displays of Covid-19 induced compassion by politicians of both genders around the world (our own president is a prime example), but I would argue that women have been able to do this more organically, and therefore authentically. Men have tended to be science, and in many cases ego led.

Research has shown that there are differences in the capacity for empathy between males and females, and a 2014 paper by Christov-Moore et al showed that these differences are not only "cultural byproducts driven by socialization" but that they are also rooted in biology (p 604 in Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews, Vol 46, 4).



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Simply put, empathy comes more naturally to women than it does to men. It's a nature and nurture thing.

In every crisis there is opportunity: for introspection, reinvention, and ultimately evolution - for doing better than we did before. The strength of female leadership during this time has been undeniable. Ardern, Ing-Wen and Merkel have put most of their male counterparts to shame, and the results speak for themselves. It is too early to say whether female-led businesses will come out of this crisis with an advantage over male-run organisations, but there has never been a better opportunity for women to flex the empathy muscle than now. Let's stop apologising for 'feeling'. Empathy is not weakness – it is a force. It will pull us through Covid-19 into a better, more inclusive, open and equal society.

ABOUT MAJA SMITH

Maja is the Customer Experience Manager at Ford South Africa. While she doesn't care much for cars, she's passionate about leading change and transformation in the customer-facing business. Maja's approach to CX focuses on getting the basics right first. Maja is a UCT Business Science, Marketing graduate with an MBA from the University of Hamburg, Germany. She has a background in Marketing and prior to joining Ford, worked at advertising agencies in the UK and SA.

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