

'Female leadership trust advantage' gives women edge in some crisis situations

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Corinne Post is a professor of management at Lehigh University. Credit: Lehigh University

Certain crises require certain female leaders. Researchers at Lehigh

University and Queen's University Belfast have found that trust established by female leaders practicing strong interpersonal skills results in better crisis resolution in cases when outcomes are predictable.

They describe this "female [leadership trust](#) advantage" in a paper published in this month's print issue of *Psychology of Women Quarterly*. Their research is the first to examine why and when a female leadership trust advantage emerges for leaders during organizational crises.

"People trust [female leaders](#) more than male leaders in times of crisis, but only under specific conditions," said paper co-author Corinne Post, professor of management at Lehigh University. "We showed that when a crisis hits an organization, people trust leaders who behave in relational ways, and especially so when the leaders are women and when there is a predictable path out of the crisis."

Relational behaviors are shown by those who think of themselves in relation to others. Such skills help build and restore trust, and, on average, are adopted more by women than men. The researchers specifically looked at the relational behavior of interpersonal emotion management (IEM), which alleviates feelings of threat during a crisis by anticipating and managing the emotions of others. IEM behaviors include removing or altering a problem to reduce [emotional impact](#); directing attention to something more pleasant; reappraising a situation as more positive; and modulating or suppressing one's emotional response. IEM is central to establishing or repairing trust, often eroded when a crisis occurs.

Researchers defined crisis as a common, though often unexpected, time-sensitive, high-impact event that may disrupt organizational functioning and pose relational threats. For a company, this could be a product safety concern, consumer data breach, oil spill, corruption allegation or widespread harassment.

"Crises are fraught with relational issues, which, unless handled properly, threaten not only organizational performance but also the allocation of organizational resources and even organizational survival," they said. "Organizational crises, therefore, require a great deal of relational and emotional work to build or restore trust among those affected and may influence such trusting behaviors as provision of resources to the organization," including economic resources and investment in the firm, as well as inspiring employee cooperation.

To examine differences in trust for men and women leaders during an organizational crisis, researchers created a set of crisis scenarios. In some scenarios, the CEO (at times a male and at other times a female) anticipated and managed the [emotions of others](#) as the crisis unfolded—and in others the CEO did not attend to others' emotions at all. Scenarios were varied to depict crises with predictable or uncertain outcomes.

"We found that this female leadership trust advantage was not just attitudinal, but that—when the consequences of the crisis were foreseeable—people were actually ready to invest much more in the firms led by relational women," Post said. "Our finding also suggests that, in an organizational crisis, female (relative to male) leaders may generate more goodwill and resources for their organization by using relational behaviors when the crisis fallout is predictable, but may not benefit from the same advantage in crises with uncertain consequences."

Demonstrating superior relational skills may help female leaders gain a trust advantage in crises that focus primarily on relationship aspects in an organization, when there is certainty around the resolution and fallout from the crisis is more controllable, for example. But it may not be as valuable when crisis outcomes are uncertain or difficult to control, when both agentic leadership (making decisions and acting quickly) and relational leadership (such as maintaining high levels of communication)

are required.

Authors on the paper, "A Female Leadership Trust Advantage in Times of Crisis: Under What Conditions?" include Post; Iona Latu, lecturer in experimental social psychology at Queen's University Belfast; and Liuba Belkin, associate professor of management at Lehigh University.

The study is unique in basing its scenarios on production and food safety crises, when most studies of female leaders and organizational crisis look at financial performance crises. It also is different from most other research that "simply assumes female leaders behave more relationally," Post said. "We were able to determine how leader gender and leader relational behaviors (interpersonal emotional management) influenced trust both independently from each other and in combination."

The findings have important implications for leadership and gender research, as well as business professionals.

"Identifying what crisis management behaviors enhance trust in female leaders, and under what conditions such trust is enhanced may, for example, help to mitigate the documented higher risk for women (compared to men) of being replaced during drawn-out crises," the researchers said.

The results also suggest that to realize their leadership advantage potential, women may need to embrace relational leadership behaviors, at least under some circumstances. "Female leaders may find it helpful to know that, when uncertainty around a crisis is low, using relational leadership behaviors may help them elicit more trust from others," they said.

The research also holds implications for human resource professionals and organizational leaders.

"Because our findings reveal the importance of relational skills in eliciting trust during a [crisis](#), we would encourage firms to consider hiring for, training and rewarding relational skills in their leaders, especially in jobs with high potential for crises," Post said.

More information: Corinne Post et al, A Female Leadership Trust Advantage in Times of Crisis: Under What Conditions?, *Psychology of Women Quarterly* (2019). [DOI: 10.1177/0361684319828292](https://doi.org/10.1177/0361684319828292)

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