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James Ross/AAP

Scott Morrison and Dan Andrews got it wrong. Here are 7 ways to get crisis leadership right

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Five years ago, as Australia burned through the catastrophic Black Summer bushfires, then-Prime Minister Scott Morrison was photographed relaxing on a Hawaiian beach.

When he returned, his now-infamous words – “I don’t hold a hose, mate” – epitomised a crisis leadership approach that came across as being built on detachment and dominance.

Fast forward to January this year and Victorian Premier Jacinta Allan is standing in fire-devastated Natimuk, announcing mental health support packages and expressing concern for traumatised livestock.

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese promises those affected: “we’ve got your back”.

Our new research suggests something is shifting with crisis leadership – although we still have a way to go.

This isn’t a story about men versus women leaders, nor Labor versus Liberal.

Rather, these contrasting responses reveal a tentative movement toward a more virtue-based approach that centres ethical considerations and away from the “strongman” prototype that has long dominated.

The masculine crisis leader prototype

Popular culture and much crisis leadership research have long celebrated a particular kind of leader in times of crisis: tough, decisive, emotionally detached and domineering.

Think of US President Donald Trump’s COVID response – confident, dismissive of experts and unmoved by growing death tolls – or former UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher’s famously tough “Iron Lady” approach to the Falklands War.

These leaders emphasise speed over deliberation, command over collaboration and displays of strength over expressions of

care. It's a style linked to ideals of masculinity that have shaped expectations for generations.

This prototype doesn't just disadvantage leaders who don't fit the mould (particularly women and those who embody characteristics culturally coded as feminine). It also sidesteps the deeply ethical nature of crises, where decisions about who gets help, who is protected and who bears the burden carry profound moral implications.

Morrison's Black Summer response exemplified these failures. He appeared to many to demonstrate physical and emotional detachment rather than accountability.

His forced handshakes with devastated community members in Cobargo came across as performative dominance rather than genuine compassion.

His refusal to meet with former fire chiefs advocating for climate action risked being widely interpreted as a closed-minded approach.

The result? Communities felt abandoned precisely when they needed leadership most.

This pattern extends beyond any single leader or political party.

During Victoria's COVID lockdowns, then-Premier Daniel Andrews was widely criticised for appearing to take a highly centralised, heavy-handed approach while appearing to lack empathy for what people were experiencing.

His leadership hinged on the command-and-control elements of the masculine prototype, even while working toward public health goals.

The 7 key virtues

Our research identifies how seven key virtues inform effective, ethical crisis leadership: courage, humanity, justice, prudence, temperance, transcendence and wisdom.

These virtues stem from the ancient philosophy of virtue ethics and are central to modern psychology and leadership development research.

By analysing 67 speeches given by heads of state, we identified the distinct role each virtue plays in crisis leadership and how their combined use offers a richer approach.

Different virtues serve distinct purposes in crisis leadership.

Leaders can showcase their own humanity, courage, wisdom and justice to build trust. They ask citizens to demonstrate temperance, humanity and wisdom to ensure cooperation. And they emphasise shared courage and transcendence to unite everyone in the belief the crisis can be overcome.

This approach offers a more effective way to lead – a shift we have seen hints of in the response to the natural disasters rocking Australia in the early months of 2026.

Let's unpack these seven virtues:

Courage is increasingly framed as a collective attribute (we are courageous), rather than an individual one (he is courageous). Instead of awaiting a lone heroic strongman, the emphasis increasingly falls on communities' collective resilience, even if traditional imagery of bravery still features prominently.

Humanity sits at the heart of current responses, encompassing empathy, care and compassion. Tangible responses include mental health support, concern for animal welfare and case workers to help navigate complex recovery needs. This isn't "soft" leadership, it's recognising that care for those suffering is foundational to effective crisis response.

Justice involves standing with communities, indicating accountability and ensuring everyone has support – even if the adequacy of that support remains contested.

Prudence (practical wisdom applied to difficult decisions) allows leaders to balance multiple perspectives and navigate complexity. While Morrison and many leaders in the past dismissed expert warnings about climate-intensified fire risk, current Australian leaders publicly reference the need to work with emergency services and consider multiple perspectives.

Temperance (encompassing humility, patience and restraint) remains the most tentatively expressed virtue in the face of current crises. While leaders avoid aggressive dismissiveness, there's room for more explicit acknowledgement of the mistakes inevitably made under pressure.

Transcendence – our connection to the intangible – allows leaders to bolster a shared belief that crises can be overcome.

Wisdom allows crisis leaders to consider more holistic data and diverse perspectives.



Daniel Andrews was criticised by many during and after the COVID pandemic. James Ross/AAP

What still holds us back – and where to next?

Despite these shifts, the masculine prototype remains powerful. Technical, rationalist language still dominates. Stoicism, decisiveness and firm command are still celebrated.

And other acts of virtue by local leaders which help address the crisis remain largely invisible, such as the grassroots organising and outreach activities that let people know others genuinely care.

The shift we're seeing represents real but tentative progress.

To consolidate and extend the shift we need to educate leaders in how to practice virtue-based crisis leadership and move on from the outdated strongman approach.

- [Australian politics](#)
- [Crisis management](#)
- [Scott Morrison](#)
- [Daniel Andrews](#)
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Read more: [‘I don’t hold a hose, mate’: Australia’s political history is full of gaffes. Here are some of the best \(or worst\)](#)

Fast forward to January this year and Victorian Premier Jacinta Allan is standing in [fire-devastated Natimuk](#), announcing mental health support packages and expressing concern for traumatised livestock.

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