



# Kent Academic Repository

Ogbonnaya, Chidiebere (2024) *When faced with deadly events, leaders react differently to their own fears and grief.* . LSE Business Review Text.

## Downloaded from

<https://kar.kent.ac.uk/105311/> The University of Kent's Academic Repository KAR

## The version of record is available from

<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/businessreview/2024/02/20/when-faced-with-deadly-events-leaders-react-differen>

## This document version

Author's Accepted Manuscript

## DOI for this version

## Licence for this version

UNSPECIFIED

## Additional information

## Versions of research works

### Versions of Record

If this version is the version of record, it is the same as the published version available on the publisher's web site. Cite as the published version.

### Author Accepted Manuscripts

If this document is identified as the Author Accepted Manuscript it is the version after peer review but before type setting, copy editing or publisher branding. Cite as Surname, Initial. (Year) 'Title of article'. To be published in **Title of Journal**, Volume and issue numbers [peer-reviewed accepted version]. Available at: DOI or URL (Accessed: date).

### Enquiries

If you have questions about this document contact [ResearchSupport@kent.ac.uk](mailto:ResearchSupport@kent.ac.uk). Please include the URL of the record in KAR. If you believe that your, or a third party's rights have been compromised through this document please see our [Take Down policy](https://www.kent.ac.uk/guides/kar-the-kent-academic-repository#policies) (available from <https://www.kent.ac.uk/guides/kar-the-kent-academic-repository#policies>).

## How Death Awareness Shapes Leadership Styles

In today's business world, discussions about mortality are often overlooked, even though death reminders are all around us. From global pandemics, wars, and natural disasters to personal trauma and emergencies, these events create *mortality cues* that affect individuals, jobs, and organizations. But what about leaders? How do they respond to these mortality cues, and what impact does this have on their teams?

Generally, we'd expect leaders to be strong and stand by their team in tough times. But leaders are human too, and sometimes struggle with their own fears and grief about death. This can result in bad choices at work, such as looking out for themselves, misusing their power, or even breaking organizational rules for personal gain. Take the pandemic for instance, **some leaders** were criticized for ignoring safety rules and caring more about saving costs than their team's welfare. **Others** didn't take the crisis seriously enough, and therefore failed to provide the necessary support and resources in a timely manner. Yet, there's still so much to learn about how leaders react in life-or-death situations.

First, we need to understand that mortality cues can affect organizations differently. Some jobs have '*internal mortality cues*'—like doctors and nurses caring for dying patients, or police officers using lethal force to defend themselves and others. These direct death reminders can either make people feel more stressed and worried at work or inspire them to cherish each day more. Moreover, there are indirect death reminders or '*external mortality cues*' that happen outside the workplace—for instance, when people hear about tragedies, read obituaries, face personal emergencies, or go to funerals. Whether direct or indirect, employees dealing with death reminders would typically seek comfort from their leaders—after all, leaders should be more experienced in managing crises.

So, in our **research**, we explored two different ways leaders react to mortality cues. Some get really nervous and start focusing more on their own interests. This type of fear, known

**Commented [CO1]:** <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-52018360>

**Commented [CO2]:** <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/may/05/boris-johnson-boasted-of-shaking-hands-on-day-sage-warned-not-to>

**Commented [CO3]:** [https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/joms.13051#:~:text=According%20to%20CMDA%2C%20mortality%20cues,reflection\)%20that%20encourages%20prosocial%20responses.](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/joms.13051#:~:text=According%20to%20CMDA%2C%20mortality%20cues,reflection)%20that%20encourages%20prosocial%20responses.)

as *death anxiety*, causes them to take unnecessary shortcuts to achieve quick results—imagine a boss who cuts down on business spending but still wants their team to work harder and bring in more money. Conversely, there are leaders who, when faced with mortality cues, really take time to figure out what truly matters in life. This process, known as *death reflection*, makes them more considerate, caring, and truly committed to bringing out the best in their teams. A perfect example is the story about [Dr. Hiba Omer](#), a senior surgeon in Sudan. When war broke out in the capital, she bravely stayed behind to motivate her team and help the wounded, despite serious threats to her own life.

Commented [CO4]: <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/14/opinion/sudan-medicine-doctors.html>

We studied 595 leaders from various workplaces in the UK, China, and Pakistan. Some of them were head nurses at emergency hospitals, looking after COVID-19 patients and witnessing sudden deaths every day. They talked about the stress of their work, the close connections with patients, and the emotional strain they felt when those patients passed away. Another group of leaders included managers and supervisors in regular jobs who encountered mortality cues from personal experiences outside of work. They described how hearing about tragedies, disasters, and deaths made them more anxious about their own mortality. Next, we explored how these feelings influenced their roles as leaders. Specifically, we were curious if it made them bend the rules, cut corners, or adjust performance standards to benefit themselves. On the flip side, we also considered whether thoughts of mortality encouraged more selfless actions in leaders, such as prioritizing their team's interests when making decisions, ensuring they feel valued at work, and creating a friendlier work environment.

Interestingly, mortality cues seem to have a dual effect on leaders. When reminded of death, some leaders may start caring more about their own needs, even if it means breaking the rules. They could overlook important safety measures, keep company resources for their own use, or twist information to make themselves look better. These actions are more common with indirect death reminders, which causes people to act out of fear or focus solely on immediate

benefits. In these situations, leaders are more likely to prioritize their own safety over their team's welfare. However, not every leader reacts this way. For some, thinking about death can lead to deep reflection about what really matters in life. These leaders become more attentive to the morale of their team and strive to make a positive impact on those around them.

We took a closer look at the data to see if having a positive mindset could be a plus for leaders. We asked them to rate how resilient and hopeful they are when things get difficult. As expected, leaders who scored high in these areas were less anxious about mortality and more focused on leading well. These are the leaders who stay calm under pressure and make choices that help the team, sometimes at their own expense. They also pay close attention to their team's needs, making sure everyone feels supported and inspired to do their best work.

So, what conclusions can we draw for businesses and their leaders? First and foremost, death reminders don't always have negative effects for leaders. It really depends on how they manage the stress and anxiety that these challenges bring. We often expect our leaders to remain calm in tough times and be there for their team. But it's important to remember that they are human too and need support just like anyone else. That's why organizations should nurture leaders' wellbeing and offer mental health support if required—whether it's counseling, time for self-care, or just lending an ear. Of course, strong leadership matters—but it's even more important to make sure they're mentally and emotionally healthy. This way, they can better support and look after their teams.

Also, having strong HR practices is essential. This means giving leaders the right training, regular feedback, and the support they need, plus coaching them on how to handle crises and bounce back from difficulty. It's also important to teach them effective ways to cope and keep a positive outlook. Doing these things can reduce stress and help improve leaders' mental health. Moreover, when we give leaders the opportunity to learn from seasoned mentors, they can pick up valuable tips and move forward in their careers.

With so many tragic events happening around us—like natural disasters, wars, and upsetting news—it's really crucial to ensure workplaces are safe and friendly for everyone. Death affects us in many ways – whether it's losing a colleague, a friend, a family member, or a famous person. That's why it's important for organizations to offer the right support to those who are grieving. It is also important to create inclusive spaces where people can have open discussions about dealing with loss.