Leadership Styles in Crisis Management: Lessons from Covid-19

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the critical importance of effective leadership in navigating complex crises. This paper investigates the role of leadership styles in crisis management, with a specific focus on lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic. By reviewing existing leadership theories, including transformational, transactional, and situational leadership, this study identifies adaptive and change-focused leadership as particularly relevant during crises. The research analyzes the phases of crisis management preparation, response, recovery, and mitigation—and examines how various leadership approaches influenced outcomes during the pandemic. Using COVID-19 as a case study, the findings underscore the need for agility, flexibility, and systemic thinking in leadership. The paper concludes with practical lessons for future crises, emphasizing the value of situational awareness, emotional intelligence, community engagement, and collaborative strategies. These insights provide a framework for improving leadership effectiveness in managing large-scale emergencies.

Keywords: Crisis management, Leadership styles, COVID-19 pandemic, Situational leadership, Adaptive leadership.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 crisis demonstrated the importance of effective leadership, which began to attract a great deal of attention given the global and unprecedented nature of COVID-19. This attention is not surprising because crises represent ultimately the moment of truth for leaders. This is certainly the case in crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which throw completely unprecedented and extremely challenging situations at leaders. The more unexpected, turbulent, and complex a crisis is, the more it exceeds our frame of reference and the greater the uncertainty. These are also the crises that elicit the strongest public and political reactions. While determining leadership styles as well as psychological and sociocultural factors to manage crisis situations, the case of COVID-19 is likely to remain a matter of interest for quite some time [1, 2]. In summary, the main objective of this paper is twofold. Firstly, it aims to paint a complete and complex picture of the leadership styles best suited for managing crisis situations by examining the literature. Secondly, it aims to evaluate the extent to which the crisis creates a parallel with the situation caused by COVID-19 in the management of crises in general and, ultimately, in pandemics. The great crises of the past invite us to learn from them in order to better prepare for different times. Crises create opportunities. Identifying them requires looking beyond the usual and thinking outside the box. The crisis has the effect of putting the notion of extraordinary leadership on the front line. Crisis leadership is about agility, flexibility, and being open to change. Crisis leadership runs on pure adrenaline. Crisis leadership means going beyond craft leadership to something more, so the kind of thinking done by scholars in emergency services leadership [3, 4].

Understanding Crisis Management

Crisis management, which is also commonly referred to as emergency management, business continuity management, or contingency planning, is a business management discipline designed to help organizations face, overcome, and thrive in various crisis situations and adverse conditions. Business psychologists have defined a crisis as a specific, unexpected, and non-routine event or series of events that

create high levels of uncertainty and threat or perceivable negative outcomes for an organization's profits, market share, competitive advantage, reputation, public image, or future business prospects. A crisis is any situation associated with a cause that has the potential to harm systematically in a massive manner. Some events may totally halt operations, while others may not halt operations but bring harm to smaller units, operations, and controlled projects, finally affecting the entire context if materialized on a larger scale. Organizations in the modern world face numerous potential threats and hazards that can disrupt their normal operations, thereby leading to severe loss of revenue, customers, employees, or even operational shutdown. In order to minimize the potential harmful impacts from these threats to their operations, organizations must have plans, procedures, and strategies in place to handle unwanted events. At the very core, crisis management is a preventive strategy designed to be put in place to arrest the crises and minimize the potential impacts of the crises on the organizations. Crisis management is a systematic key component of successful management that can be broadly characterized as consisting of four activities or phases: preparation, response, recovery, and mitigation. These are all connected in reducing crisis risks. Decision-making has an important role in determining the effectiveness of crisis management. In this period of global crisis management during COVID-19, organizations must realize that in order to avoid escalating into a crisis due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it is critical for a company to exist and prepare for similar circumstances. The reality is that crises are becoming more prevalent and can be comparable in scale to the COVID-19 pandemic. Crisis management is not easy to put in place, as poor mitigation measures will lead to ineffective recovery. Therefore, it is critical to avoid possible crises in the current industry, given the size of potential COVID-19 type crises. Upon the occurrence of crises, it becomes necessary to develop a suitable response likely to mitigate against damages, as a crisis can easily escalate within a short period of time. Thus, methods that directly deal with the crisis and seek to minimize any further harm display mitigation. Recovery will take place as soon as methods with respect to the previous phase (response) have been initiated. After the immediate crisis has been managed or taken under control, there will also be a period of time whereby businesses are faced with returning operations to a normal level. Recovery addresses a longer-term period, e.g., months, rather than directly addressing how the situation is managed following an extreme event [5, 6].

Leadership Theories and Models

There are numerous theories of leadership that have been tested in the context of crisis management. Classical leadership theories that are most relevant to leadership in crises usually include transformational leadership, transactional leadership, and the more contemporary leadership style, situational leadership. In a comparison of a variety of classical leaders in various crisis situations, it was concluded that the leadership style most successfully used in crises was situational. This was because effective crisis management required adaptation to changes in the situation and flexibility, which only situational approaches provided. Since the turn of the century, several studies in crisis management have tested the effectiveness of situational leadership in this particular context and, more frequently than not, found support for its predominance. In crisis situations, a variety of leaders may be required to produce multiple responses to address unique and often urgent problems. As a result, the leadership style that is considered most appropriate to the context of managing in a crisis should be one that is adaptive in nature [1, 7]. Change-focused adaptive leadership focuses on reactive personal and organizational resilience and recovery, as well as developing organizational adaptive capacity. Those working in the adaptive leadership paradigm focus on identifying that crises may indeed bring a positive change and, as such, challenge much of the mainstream conceptualizations of 'crisis' as 'negative' and 'unwanted'. Change-focused adaptive leadership goes beyond theoretical ideas of resilience and service delivery that tacitly negate organizational transformation aims and results, and looks to 'turn adversity into benefit' through 'agile' responses. This theory builds into the leadership of projects and crisis management paradigm a whole-of-community and whole-of-system view where complexity rules and ways of knowing and interrelating will have to adapt to uncertain futures. Some authors suggest a multitude of leadership styles, contingent on particular organizational or cultural contexts. It cautions against arriving at normative prescriptions. To drive long-term improvements in organizational and community well-being, advocacy for 'agile' organizational restructuring and change efforts is made. These objectives are developed through an internally focused change leadership theory which, at its heart, has adaptive, transformative, and transactional elements. It is suggested that all of these theories are relevant if tailored to the context. Change-focused adaptive leadership is well suited to managing complex emergent change when targeting the whole of community step and thereby has the broad-ranging systemic change needed.

In more predictable, incremental change processes in commerce, where individual leadership is more focused on internal change in project organizations, it is suggested by some authors that the application of change-focused adaptive, transformative, or transactional leadership should also be supported. Although underpinning frameworks may be shared, the leadership specifically will be different, with an adaptive collaborative shared leadership style being suggested. Managerial values and approaches for long-term change and collaboration should not change [8, 9].

Case Study: COVID-19 Pandemic

In this paper, a case study of the COVID-19 pandemic is used to illustrate the relevance of various leadership styles in crisis management. In particular, the case shows that managing a global crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic requires leaders to use a combination of different leadership styles. While we rely on multiple sources of evidence to support our arguments, caution should be exercised based on the limited data available at the time of writing. Since the COVID-19 pandemic is not yet over, it is plausible that new findings may result in a revised understanding of the pandemic and its management, including the effectiveness of various leadership styles [10, 11]. COVID-19 began in China in 2019 and rapidly evolved into a global pandemic. As an extremely infectious disease, it became a public health emergency of national concern in many countries. The COVID-19 virus continues to spread rapidly and cause horror, many of the negative results it brings could have been avoided if leaders had handled COVID-19 in the right way. Our model suggests that leadership is the single most important factor in many of the relevant variables related to the scale and persistence of a nation's COVID-19 crisis management success and that a leader's leadership style is the main factor in leadership [12, 13].

Lessons Learned and Best Practices

Given the diverse array of challenges that each leader faced during this crisis, it is to be anticipated that a broad range of responses may emerge in managing these COVID-19 responses. Yet, from these eight case studies of leadership style amidst the crisis, there are several recurring themes that other leaders may find useful when navigating future crises. These include enhancing situational awareness, paying attention to information sources and flows, increasing capacity while managing demand, using networks and interagency resource sharing, employing the values of procedural justice, transparency, and participation in decision-making, connecting to the community and being visible in doing so, and demonstrating an appropriate emotional stance in accordance with the demands of the crisis phase. The rough emerging leadership practices from this guide to future crisis leadership can be summed up in ten broad lessons: L1. Flex your approach to strategy and leadership. L2. Use your systems to build situational awareness. L3. Listen to the people in and behind the crisis. L4. Produce a series of step-by-step plans. L5. Explain moral and policy choices. L6. Control information and be open. L7. Cascade resource taxonomies. L8. Talk about emotions, values, and strategy. L9. Understand the possible legacies of big decisions. L10. Engage in your local communities before needing to work with them. Together, these offer the educational arm of this manuscript—they can be framed as strategies provided to practitioners on how to enhance their leadership style during unexpected major events. In what follows, we extend this analysis directly as future strategies for leaders managing major emergencies [14, 5]. Practical implications: There are two main points at this stage. First, the best-practice findings offer would-be users of this guide an intricate view of leadership during a crisis living 'in action.' Given the rhythm of a crisis and the focus of the leaders bolting in response strategies, it would be too much to expect the leaders to stop their attention to summarize their findings through a combination of research. It is, therefore, conceivable that one of the successes of major leaders as they encounter a new, unanticipated crisis, is their ability to transform extraordinary abilities into practice. In short, leaders working in 'elusive' fields are people who are 'in the flow'—as sports and creative artists express it. These leaders are attuned to the moment in profound ways; they understand the whole game and ensure that their actions—whether these involve the promulgation of policy amendments on social distancing or the tightening of travel visas—enhance their worldview rather than reduce it. However, what is learned from this analysis can be summarized: 'this is what leaders do in a crisis.' Furthermore, it provides a sense of what might be possible practice as well in preparing for future practice. In short, while professional crises are, by their nature, diverse, individual social systems have a number of recurring strategy forms [15, 16].

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic served as a litmus test for leadership across various sectors, highlighting the need for adaptive, situational, and collaborative approaches. Leaders who demonstrated agility, emotional intelligence, and a commitment to community engagement were better positioned to manage the

complexities of the crisis. The case study of COVID-19 underscores the importance of preparation, strategic communication, and flexibility in leadership during emergencies. By applying lessons from this unprecedented crisis, future leaders can enhance their ability to respond effectively to emerging challenges. Ultimately, successful crisis leadership involves not just managing immediate threats but also leveraging crises as opportunities for systemic improvement and transformation.

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