Editorial

Leadership under Crises:
A Research Agenda for the Post-COVID-19 Era

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"When written in Chinese, the word 'crisis' is composed of two characters – one represents danger, and the other represents opportunity."

John F. Kennedy, former President of the United States of America

The ongoing COVID-19 crisis has once again reminded everyone about the critical role that leaders and leadership play in dealing with unexpected events threatening the existence of organizations worldwide (Bundy, Pfarrer, Short, & Coombs, 2017). Given their position of influence, leaders receive an increased amount of attention and scrutiny during these challenging times. This is because people expect leaders to provide guidance, comfort, hope, and accurate information. Such sudden spotlight compiled with a strong need for leadership under uncertainty has been shown to benefit even non-prototypical leaders in the form of bipartisan support and increased perception of effectiveness and charisma (e.g., Rast III, Gaffney, Hogg, & Crisp, 2012). However, recent events demonstrate that many leaders are unable to harness the opportunity posed by the crises, such that some of them lose support, face resistance from their stakeholders, or fail to save their organizations from economic distress. Considering that the only certain thing about crises is that they are likely to happen again, we argue that more attention should be paid to leadership in highly disruptive contexts.

Crisis Leadership: What We Know

Literature shows that leaders' success under crises is largely dependent on their ability to process information, act on it, and influence others within and outside of their organization (Bundy et al., 2017). While these skills lay at the core of the leaders' tasks regardless of circumstances, crises bring them additional demands and challenges. For instance, leaders must be able to make sense of the events unfolding with a high degree of uncertainty not only related to future developments, but to the nature of the crisis itself. Thus, to be effective during critical events, leaders need to collect and assess multiple pieces of information coming from different sources while being mindful of their own individual biases that may affect this process (Hadley, Pittinsky, Sommer, & Zhu, 2011). One way to accomplish this is to maintain a 'deliberate calm' that allows leaders to detach from the crisis and focus on how to navigate the situation at hand (Garcia, 2006).

Further, in crises, decisions need to be made based on imperfect information and usually involve much higher stakes (Bundy et al., 2017). At the same time, considering the urgency of the situation, they must be made quickly and without hesitation. As such, instead of freezing under pressure or acting impulsively, leaders should be able to methodically generate response options, create sound criteria to evaluate them, and, consequently, take action. In order to do this effectively, the leader should learn to cope with uncertainty and needs to remain open-minded to make necessary adjustments such that the overall crisis response could be more adaptive (Hadley et al., 2011).

Finally, given high uncertainty and ambiguity of crises, organization members and stakeholders are likely to experience extreme emotional reactions and develop divergent interpretations of the events (Sobral, Carvalho, Lagowska, Furtado, & Grobman, 2020). Therefore, to effectively manage people's expectations, emotions, and to guarantee cohesive action and good communication flow, leaders have to work on the perceptions of the crisis within and outside of their organizations. In this regard, such actions as communicating in a timely and transparent manner, displaying 'bounded optimism,' publicly defending the employees, and engaging in self-sacrificing behaviors (Bundy et al., 2017) have been shown to be particularly helpful in alleviating followers' anxiety and project confidence that the organization will find a way through. Finally, leaders need to show empathy, signaling that they are attentive and concerned with people's distress and are taking measures to support the followers.

Future Research Directions: What We Need To Know

While the abovementioned findings remain relevant and valuable, the COVID-19 outbreak has shown that technological advances and growing interconnectedness between people have changed the organizational landscape. Consequently, the current context presents leaders with new challenges and opportunities when responding to disruptive events. Below we discuss possible topics of interest that the scholars might want to address in the future in order to better understand the behaviors and attitudes resulting from leadership under crises.

Crisis as an opportunity for leadership development and emergence

According to scholars, experience plays a central role in the leadership development process. However, not every leadership experience involves enough novelty, risk, interpersonal diversity, and boundary spanning activities to create the awareness that something new must be learned and thus facilitate the leader's growth. Given that crises expose leaders to conflicting pieces of information from multiple domains, high-stakes decision-making, and demand interaction with multiple stakeholders, they provide ideal conditions for leaders to acquire new skills via problem-related experiences. Relatedly, living through a highly disruptive event is likely to enhance leader's self-efficacy and confidence in dealing with crises and increase their motivation to lead in general (Chan & Drasgow, 2001). However, not all leaders seem to be able to embrace this opportunity for growth and development. This is because leading during crisis is an enormous challenge, which requires extraordinary physical, technical, social, and emotional skills. Many appointed leaders may not possess them or may never have been asked to display them, which gives an opening for other individuals to engage in leadership behavior. As such, future research could explore how each of the elements of crises (uncertainty, interactions with multiple stakeholders, etc.) stimulates leadership development and emergence. Scholars could also assess how actual and emergent leaders can capitalize on crisis-related leadership skills to either consolidate or develop their identities as leaders.

Self-awareness and expertise

During crises, leaders are likely to be faced with information from outside of their area of expertise. At the same time, given that critical events involve a high degree of urgency, leaders do not have time to learn new skills. Therefore, it stands to reason that to increase the effectiveness of their response, they should be able to reach out to individuals with relevant knowledge. However, recent events have shown that some leaders cannot recognize their limitations, and when making important decisions, they rely on their own intuition and ignore scientific evidence. Studies on leader humility have shown that managers who demonstrate willingness to learn from others and aim towards self-improvement are likely to stimulate collective action and increase company performance (e.g., Chiu, Owens, & Tesluk, 2016). Further, they are likely to diminish followers' emotional exhaustion. Future studies could evaluate the perceptions and effectiveness of humble leaders during crises and explore what prevents leaders from demonstrating humility when it seems to be most needed.

Group decision-making and collective leadership

Complexity and flat structure of the modern organizations imply that leaders must often interact with teams and other leaders when making decisions. Although studies show that lower status differential between team members is likely to stimulate creativity, they also suggest that it may result in conflict due to the plurality of emerging perspectives (Denis, Lamothe, & Langley, 2001). In such contexts, a leader's ability to recognize relevant and unique information that may resurface during group discussions and to consolidate divergent interests seems crucial (Maitlis

& Sonenshein, 2010). Therefore, it would be relevant to consider how leaders process new information that goes against the preferences of the majority and how they convince other powerful stakeholders that the correct course of action has been chosen.

Leading home-office employees

In many cases, crisis drastically changes the way people work, communicate, and socialize, which presents significant challenges to individuals and organizations. During the COVID-19 health crisis, the policy of social distancing and isolation have introduced people with a new reality of working from home – suddenly, not by choice, and regardless of people's experience with remote work. This unprecedented situation has brought up several reflections about the role of leaders in managing remote employees during difficult times and has created numerous research opportunities. For example, distance working can be a confusing experience for everyone if leaders turn to their traditional set of leadership behaviors. This can cause problems with task completion, performance assessment, and employee engagement. While there is research addressing this topic in "normal contexts," the same theoretical and practical features might no longer apply in critical contexts due to increased disruption of routines and higher uncertainty of both private and professional lives of the employees (e.g., Cho, 2020). Therefore, new studies, focused on how crises affect the effects of virtual leadership, are in order.

The coronavirus pandemic has highlighted the key role played by leadership during crises with some global leaders' popularity surging and the others' plummeting. For instance, we already know that leaders are particularly relevant to the process of shaping the meaning of the events and guiding stakeholders' interpretation and understanding of the nature and effects of the evolving crises (Sobral et al., 2020). However, our knowledge regarding how leaders can successfully tackle the unprecedented challenges that the ongoing crisis has created for businesses and governments worldwide remains scant. Future research should focus on some of the topics raised in this article to help to better prepare leaders and organizations for the next large-scale crises.

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