

Leadership in the Post-COVID Era

Roystone F. M. Nelson*, Sven M. Douglas
College of Management, Texila American University, Guyana

Abstract

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly altered the social, political, economic, and psychological terrains that frame leadership. While the crisis has hit nations, communities, and organizations to varying extents, it is already clear that leaders across all these contexts have faced, and will continue to face, significant transformational challenges. The global scale of the pandemic and the associated economic repercussions are still unfolding, leaving leaders ill-prepared for the myriad uncertainties the crisis has unleashed Bauwens et al., 2022. These have compounded the plethora of existing pressures, disparities, and vulnerabilities across societies and highlighted the urgent need for leadership that can help navigate the daunting task of post-COVID directions. This paper focuses on the evolving sets of leadership skills that will be particularly central for such a task and explores the key competencies deemed to be of increasing importance within these skills. It is guided by the premise that certain leadership capabilities will be more crucial for enabling states, communities, and organizations to respond effectively to the pandemic's complex challenges and opportunities. The author aims to provide a roadmap for cultivating these competencies.

Keywords: COVID-19, Crisis, Emotional Intelligence, Leadership, Pandemic, Virtual.

Introduction

COVID-19 has brought an unprecedented set of challenges. Not just to the world's healthcare systems, but to society as a whole, to the economy, to the way work gets and does get done, and to life at large. It is hardly surprising, then, that leadership and organizational scholars have turned their gaze to understanding if the features and dynamics of this event have the potential to reshape the existing paradigms or to foster new theoretical nesting [1].

The way COVID-19 has impacted work organization is arguably the most radical in living memory. Work has gone quite forcibly, virtually. Work has disappeared entirely for some sectors, while some have been added to existing sectors. Leadership mandates initially muted or fragmented a dynamic and contingent mixture of roles, evoking an unusual

'leadership void' in some organizations. Current mandates seem distant and difficult to support, posing the question of how this new reality is reflected in, and demands new efforts from, organizational leaders. Surviving models of leadership may be adapted into new roles or practices. It is then worth investigating ongoing changes in leadership tactics against this fast-moving organizational backdrop.

This paper critically considers how organizational leadership, and the dynamics of organizations may have shifted with or in response to pandemic environments. It begins by introducing the topic, presenting the relevance and broad interest of understanding new models of organizational leadership, and posing some of the current critical questions about adaptability and resilience. Ultimately, it invites readers to consider the implications of the current environment for conceptually

renewed models of what might be deemed 'good' leadership, and this reflection touches on the apparent distance or unspoken dispute between the practical relevance and the theoretical focus of organizational studies.

The Impact of COVID-19 on Leadership

COVID-19 has had a profound impact on leadership practices that go beyond aiding in crisis response or adapting to the operational challenges it poses. Since its rapid spread across the globe, organizations in the public, private, and non-profit sectors, among others, have found themselves facing unexpected emergencies and predicaments with, in many cases, long-lasting repercussions [2].

Leaders have been forced to not only grapple with the short-term practical disruptions brought about by lockdown policies, supply chain interruptions, travel restrictions, and the urgent health-related needs of workers or citizens, but also to rethink their operational strategies and internal organization's structure, processes, and culture in the light of the long-term transformation caused by the virus [3].

Cognizant of the impossibility of a comprehensive treatment of the multifaceted leadership implications of the pandemic, some general observations follow, without aiming to set a rigid framework, on how COVID-19 has been reshaping organizations and thus affecting leadership practices within them [1].

The priorities of today's leaders are reflected in their needs and decision-making processes. Many are attempting to restructure organizational leadership to imitate pre-pandemic arrangements, as they foresee the implications of the present leadership practices, which were forced upon us by COVID-19.

Challenges Faced by Leaders

Leadership is never easy, but during the COVID-19 pandemic, leaders at every level were faced with pandemonium, the likes of which have rarely been experienced. The hallmarks were uncertainty and rapid change.

Overnight, leaders faced problems that had no precedent, no playbook, and (initially at least) no clear solution. There was confusion and a huge volume of often conflicting advice. Leadership, too, had to then involve a lot of both interpretation and improvisation. Operationally, leaders were confronted with issues such as ensuring a supply of adequate personal protective equipment (PPE), training staff in effective use, creating 'red' and 'clean' areas, and ensuring adequate staffing. This was all done with little or no experience, exposure, or knowledge of any sort. Absences due to illness, shielding, or legal fear of returning to work created substantial workforce planning problems. Other immense issues stemmed from the need to radically alter the behavior of millions of people across the population. Public health measures required people to forget their usual social interactions, for everything from birthdays to funerals. This had substantial implications for, inter alia, mental health, which created further problems for leaders needing to facilitate fear and anxiety.

At work, as millions were suddenly unemployed, employees feared for their jobs. But even early on, there were more advisory murmurings that asymptomatic or symptomatic but undetected transmission could likely also occur. Hence, an argument was made that the only solution was to let everyone take the best precaution – remain at home, as much as possible.

As governments began to take the lead on policy, timing and consistency became fraught. Furlough schemes were put in place to protect jobs, but they were never going to apply to everyone. As a result, those not eligible were let go (at least in the private sector). This question of wisdom in hindsight was the key issue then with leadership under the spotlight. Enactment of policy was, of course, difficult, and there will always be cases where decisions were unpopular but made with good intent for the majority. But there were failings, the failure to adequately stockpile (before the need) PPE

being one. The entertainment of mass gatherings (in many areas – especially in Guyana) the week after lockdown was another. Regarding this, areas where promising ideas were acted on, but seen too late, were the delayed lockdown measures. Requirements for social distancing in enclosed settings may have been essential, but where were schools and universities in the plan? They remained open for far too long. At a more day-to-day level, it remains the case that the public was exhorted to use their common sense to do the right thing, although the necessary actions could vary case by case.

Broadly, there would be much greater acceptance of the “stay alert” if there were any specific guidance given at an early stage, at the organizational level. It was no wonder that almost suddenly, the clubs and other social gatherings were bustling, and just days later, the police and military were given powers to enforce a national curfew. Reassuringly perhaps, no one country had done particularly well; many governments had later admitted things they’d do differently. Nor was there one model of openness or closeness in society that could be said to work better – just a patchwork of different approaches, perhaps with no one better or worse than any other [4].

The issue of whether others, particularly historical leaders, would have managed better in such a situation could perhaps be left to the experts. Beyond operability, the pandemic also created philosophical questions about the nature of leadership itself. Amongst these, profound issues such as pragmatism vs. idealism, and consensual vs. decisive approaches were explored against the backdrop of a public health crisis.

Adaptations and Innovations in Leadership Styles

Years after the COVID-19 pandemic, the ecosystem and leadership environments have transitioned considerably. Organizations have pivoted to rapid changes and developed

innovative implementations to survive and even grow. Some of these unforeseen realignments have been both pristine and more proficient ways of working. The business world has reset its course, and leaders have tailored their sails. These adaptations and alterations in leadership strategies were necessary to match the new unpredictable wafts. Such a trend can be observed across services and academic inquiries [1].

At the macro level, these changes are the industries and sectors of focus or the shift toward popularity. At a micro level, the trend is the strategic leadership styles and their adaptations after the outbreak of the pandemic. This latest theme is suggested in the context of a bottom-up, more operational view, by zooming in on the changes adaptive leaders made to enhance team cohesion and the challenging development of these changes in innovative solutions to maintain engagement amidst adversity.

Once the pandemic broke out, innovative technologies, agile models, and flexible formations were integrated to enforce the change. As an example, the leader’s virtual communication was predominantly conducted in writing, mostly via emails or group texts. As the panic at the outbreak slowed, leaders turned to technology to help with virtual communication; the notability of text-based communication gave way to more verbal and visual communication through multiple virtual video communication platforms. Virtual communication was further integrated with offline, irregular personal conferences and small group meetings. Thus, virtual conversations became more effective and transparent, and overall communication quality was improved [20].

Leaders recognized the strategic importance of embracing transparency instead of sticking to the more traditional strong-stone strategy focused on external power appearances during this crisis. Openly discussing mistakes and vulnerabilities engendered trust and was a way

for team members to empathize and relate with the leader. Enabled by the circumstances, the shift toward transparency and vulnerability has contributed to more open communication, and team members felt their emotions were more heard and validated. There was also a noticeable improvement in team members' candid responses and concise critical feedback, resulting in more effective constructive interaction and faster problem-solving [5].

With the support of the premise, a more comprehensive approach has been customized to foster a more collaborative and supportive environment among team members, inclusive of shared emotional support, drafted by the team, more transparent agenda settings, and a mutual voluntary efficiency inspection system. In this context, transparency was also encouraged and exemplified to enhance team collaboration and knowledge management. As the pandemic impelled the transition to remote working, leaders seized novel opportunities in concord with the remote working arrangement to innovate and develop practices that would foster a more collaborative and cohesive team [6].

This exploration further supports how these practices progressed, discussing the growing pains and the more stable development alongside the added meticulous adaptations. A list of feasible categories is provided plausibly to afford to bionomically invite additional entries. Example cases were given, detailing how the innovative implementations engendered some challenges that were later addressed through further adaptations. It is further reflected in the hypothetically enduring influence and the post-pandemic version of the implemented practices.

Key Leadership Skills for the Post-COVID World

New realities call for new leadership skills. The post-COVID world will only further underline the importance of adaptability and resilience when it comes to leadership. The

speed at which developments happened in the period after the official end of the pandemic only further underscored that those who wish to lead will need to be able to maneuver the uncertain and rapidly changing terrain of our lives and work [7].

Yet the constantly evolving nature of the workforce also necessitates leaders capable of assuring pivots to new contexts and forms of work. This all falls under the broader umbrella of creating an environment that supports and nurtures growth and development. As such, pushing for and enabling new opportunities for learning, growth, and change is key to keeping pace with new challenges [8].

On the other hand, there's no growth without care. Hence, emotional intelligence, or rather the ability to self-regulate and understand your own emotions as well as to empathize with others' emotions, goal-directed behavior, and focus on understanding personal relationships with others, becomes increasingly valuable. This is particularly important within diverse settings and when working within teams with people of divergent backgrounds [9].

Yet all the changes mentioned must be underlined by a solid foundation of good internal and external communication. That's the best way to handle ambiguity, and more importantly, to try and alleviate anxiety and fear within the team and propel better understanding, common goals, and ways to reach those goals. Internal sharing becomes particularly important when working across different teams or trying to enable innovation and transparency, two other qualities fast becoming key to good business practice [10].

Resilience and Flexibility

The potential future of work may consist of various states of unpredictability, uncertainty, and disruption. The volatility brought on by the extreme events of 2020 has made it clear that leaders who can rapidly navigate shifting contexts without losing perspective are

essential for societal well-being and progress [11].

This subsection will focus on resilience and flexibility as crucial leadership competencies going forward. Recommendations are made for leaders looking to improve those aspects within themselves and their teams, or on rebuilding a business culture that emphasizes those competencies.

Resilience can be understood as the ability both to withstand and to rebound from diverse kinds of disruptions, especially the unexpected or extreme kind [12]. There are strong suggestions that leaders, when facing threats to their way of life or vocation, tend not just to be adaptable, but to view adversity with a particular mindset, essentially treating it as preparation for future growth [13].

There is now a robust literature on individual and organizational strategies by which resilience can be cultivated, especially so that leaders are less likely to flounder under more extreme stresses. These are emblematic of a process of maturing and widespread understanding, likely harm-reduction interventions that are taken for granted today, but which tend not to be prioritized. The shift of viewpoint is to recommend areas for leaders who wish to think more proactively about cultivating resilience where they work, positively capitalizing on an experience that bears a clear legacy. Leaders who find productive opportunities to foster resilience may also learn to find these more or less integrated with more general programs of productivity improvement. Solutions for developing resilience presumably cultivate organizational resilience more generally. Just like any other capacity, resilience should be disposable at any level of the organization. But there's evidence that leaders play more key roles in creating the culture of their teams. And so, sowing the seeds of resilience in the lower reaches may lead to a cascade of respectful and mindful practices that ascend to the managerial level.

Empathy and Emotional Intelligence

In the management of employees and crises, acknowledging employees' emotional responses and challenges is important. Although leaders are not trained nurses, counselors, or therapists, they do have the power to manage their employees' feelings [14].

Empathy is strongly linked with emotional intelligence (EI), which defines a person's capacity to effectively identify, evaluate, control, and convey emotions. Leaders with EI are more effective at understanding and regulating their own emotions, and those of others. On average, emotionally aware personnel are also stronger at socio-emotional competencies, such as sharing information, communicating with empathy, making effective decisions, and equipment to persuade [15]. This establishes a stronger and more effective organizational situation, both of which are crucial elements of managerial efficacy and improved team results.

The uncertainty produced by COVID-19 has intensified the desire of workers to be overseen empathetically. With leaders overlooking the feelings and expertise of employees, the team cannot thrive, innovate, or develop successfully. Working environments focused on EI aid the promotion of social cohesion and improved communication, thus compensating for the absence of physical encounters during a period of lockdown and improving social relations among personnel. When collaborating in a virtual environment, sensitivity to feelings contributes to more inclusive dialogues and gestures, generating a culture in which team participants are informed and seen [16].

Finally, the pandemic has led to complicated organizational circumstances with considerable implications for the well-being of personnel. Customers and jobs have been missing, there has been concern about health and safety, wages and job prospects have been diminished, and the boundaries between work and personal life have become increasingly blurred. Such

conditions trigger and exacerbate emotional responses like dread, remorse, rage, and hopelessness, which are emotionally challenging and usually delay choices [17].

Leading Remote and Hybrid Teams

In the aftermath of the COVID-19 outbreak, the leading workplace strategies quickly developed, with hallmark adaptations on remote work or hybrid remote-on-site work. Before COVID-19, around 17% of employees in the U.S. worked from home at least 5 days a week, thus making remote work a popular choice for many knowledge workers. However, after COVID-19 hit, this figure quickly rose to 44% during the peak of the pandemic, decreasing slightly to 37% a year later in 2021. Recurrent statistics show the inherent path in the way of remote work. The growth rate of the work-from-home (WFH) population was 10 times faster than the increase in the overall workforce after the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020. Under this context, management and design strategies need to be adapted or developed to enhance remote or hybrid team effectiveness and a healthy team climate. As such, leading remote and hybrid teams will remain an especially useful organizational research topic in the post-COVID-19 era environments [18].

A study conducted throughout the first year of COVID-19 emphasized the adaptability of communication methods among leaders as an urgent need in ensuring continuous, clear, and connected communication. With managers and leaders working remotely, it often becomes harder for them to engage with their teams, especially around any informal matters or chances to just check in. Setting clear expectations is more important than ever, especially in a remote or hybrid scenario, in which communication might run differently, hence fostering accountability to make sure they happen the right way. A further study suggested that there was a need for organizational leaders to explicitly foster a

sense of community and belonging to the organization to satisfy the need to belong in, at home, and circle spaces during the COVID-19 pandemic [19].

Conclusion and Future Outlook

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019 and its continuing global impact have witnessed profound and rapid changes in the social, political, and economic environment. This has laid an unprecedented test on individual and organizational adaptability and agility. At the same time, this has also brought about new understandings of the existing arrangements in these areas. This is the context in which organizations are rediscovering the importance of long-term planning and organizational agility, and individuals are looking into well-being and values. The continual consequence of this discussion is the wisdom that organizations can neither thrive with risk assessed at a 'comfortable' level nor entirely manage to build a 'zero-risk' environment. Instead, as [1] posited, organizations should treat uncertainty as if it is more pressing and digest the complexity into their daily arrangements or future designs.

People can neither be unceasingly active in maximized adaptability nor waive the daily stress they bear. It is also about the suggestion of better management of stress and clarity seeking within the given capacity, or reminders of a mindful look at the present situations of simultaneous complexities of uncertainties.

Despite our fervent wish to forget the still, slightly ongoing pandemic, it is prudent to stop fixating on the past and instead, move forward.

An individual changes as fast as the environment and leadership responses they adopt, so too does the world, and so too do the organizations within this world. The pandemic has had an unprecedented impact both on leadership and on the societal level, as progressively acknowledged in academia. A lesson learned is now about the timely response to changes, or rather, preparation for fast and

considered actions in an uncertain and rapidly evolving environment, as the changes in leadership across COVID-19 begin to manifest.

Understanding that the pandemic has profound impacts both on the level of leadership (that is, how leaders behave in response to the crisis) and on a societal level (that is, how leadership might be redefined or reevaluated as a social erudite or manager), the individuals shift their responses to focus on preparing the future adaptability and considered flexibility rather than to react passively.

Acknowledgment

The advancement of the article is due to the encouragement, support, and generosity of individuals to whom unreserved appreciation must be shown. With all humility, I am thankful to Sven Douglas, PhD (Candidate), Texila American University, India, who played a significant role in making this article come to fruition.

Conflict of Interest

I, Roystone Nelson, declare that there is no conflict of interest in the data collection, writing of the script, and publication by the Journal.

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Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Author Contributions

Sven Douglas conceptualized the study, conducted the primary analysis, and drafted the manuscript. Roystone Nelson contributed to the data interpretation and critical revision of the final draft. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Ethical Approval

This study did not involve human participants and therefore did not require formal ethical approval. However, all ethical guidelines for academic integrity and research conduct were strictly adhered to.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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