

Exploring Leadership Strategies in the COVID-19 Pandemic

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How to cite this paper: Lukyamuzi, B. S. (2024). Exploring Leadership Strategies in the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Open Journal of Leadership*, 13, 39-53.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/ojl.2024.131004>

Received: January 20, 2024

Accepted: March 19, 2024

Published: March 22, 2024

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Abstract

This study delves into the intricate dynamics of leadership approaches amid the unprecedented challenges posed by the outbreak of the novel coronavirus in 2019 (COVID-19 pandemic). Employing a scholarly perspective, this research examines various techniques used by leaders, highlighting the critical relevance of successful leadership and change management in the face of uncertainty. “When the winds of change blow, some people build walls, and others build windmills.”—Chinese proverb. This study critically evaluates contemporary theoretical frameworks and managerial perspectives, shedding light on their relevance in managing pandemic-induced changes. Through extensive literature review, case analyses, and empirical studies, the research synthesizes valuable insights. Despite limitations related to real-time data availability and the evolving nature of the crisis, this study offers evidence-based recommendations for leaders navigating similar challenges, enhancing the understanding of people management during turbulent times.

Keywords

Leadership Approaches, COVID-19 Pandemic, Turbulent Times, People Management, Change Management, HR Practices

1. Introduction

In the dynamic and ever-evolving landscape of the global business environment, effective leadership and change management have emerged as critical components of successful people management, especially in the face of unprecedented challenges like the COVID-19 pandemic (Belias & Koustelios, 2014). A Study by Makki and Alqahtani (2023) has outlined that the outbreak COVID-19 pandemic catalyzed a seismic shift, compelling organizations to adapt swiftly and decisively. To navigate the intricacies of this crisis, leaders found themselves thrust

to the forefront, grappling with uncertainties and uncharted territories, necessitating innovative and adaptive approaches to guide their organizations and employees through the storm (Ellingrud, 2020).

This report delves into the intricate interplay between leadership, change management, and the contemporary challenge of the COVID-19. By scrutinizing the diverse leadership strategies employed by leaders in response to the pandemic-induced changes, this study aims to dissect the underlying theories and managerial perspectives that have shaped these approaches. Understanding these nuanced strategies is imperative in deciphering the essence of effective leadership amidst turmoil and uncertainty.

1.1. Aims and Objectives

The primary objective of this report is to critically evaluate major contemporary theoretical and managerial perspectives on people management, with a specific focus on the role of flexible leadership and individual perspectives in managing the changes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. Through an in-depth analysis, the report seeks to shed light on the strategic significance of these leadership approaches and their profound impact on various stakeholders, including employees, customers, and the overall organizational ecosystem.

In pursuit of this overarching aim, the report has specific objectives:

- **Exploration of Leadership Approaches:** This involves investigating diverse leadership strategies adopted by different leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic, and examining their effectiveness in managing organizational changes and uncertainties.
- **Analysis of Theoretical Perspectives:** The report critically evaluates contemporary theoretical frameworks related to people management and leadership, emphasizing their relevance and application in the context of the pandemic.
- **Assessment of Managerial Perspectives:** The study evaluates managerial practices and approaches that have proven successful in addressing the challenges posed by the pandemic, emphasizing their adaptability and effectiveness.
- **Provision of Recommendations:** The report synthesizes findings from literature and empirical evidence to offer well-founded recommendations for leaders and organizations facing similar challenges, emphasizing evidence-based strategies for navigating crises.

1.2. Scope, Problems, and Limitations

The research's scope is limited to the examination of leadership strategies employed specifically in response to pandemic-induced changes. The report does not encompass a detailed analysis of historical pandemics or other unrelated crisis scenarios.

Additionally, the study may face limitations concerning the availability of real-time data and the evolving nature of the pandemic. As the situation contin-

ues to unfold, new leadership strategies and challenges may emerge, which might not be fully captured within the scope of this report.

To achieve the outlined objectives, the research methodology involves an extensive literature review, analysis of case studies, and empirical analyses. In-depth scholarly articles, academic journals, books, and credible online sources are scrutinized to extract relevant information and draw insightful conclusions.

2. Leadership Approaches amidst COVID-19

The beauty of leadership that can only be seen when you get to know it as suggested by Bennis and Nanus, 1985 as (cited in Popper & Lipshitz, 1993) it was yet to be tested during the COVID-19 pandemic (World Health Organization, 2020) an unprecedented global crisis, thrust leaders into uncharted territories, demanding innovative approaches to navigate the challenges. Within the realm of people management, several leadership approaches emerged as crucial in this context, including transformational leadership, situational leadership, and servant leadership. This analysis critically evaluates these approaches, drawing on examples from prominent leaders like Jacinda Ardern, the former Prime Minister of New Zealand since October 26, 2017. A globally recognized leader who gained acclaim for her compassionate response to the 2019 Christchurch Mosque shootings and effective handling of the COVID-19 pandemic and explores their strengths, limitations, and implications for effective people management during the pandemic. Ardern is known for progressive policies, commitment to social justice, and dedication to gender equality. In 2021, she was elected Deputy Chair of the Council of Women World Leaders, highlighting her role in promoting women's leadership on the global stage (Who is Jacinda Ardern - Jacinda Ardern - Council of Women World Leaders (councilwomenworldleaders.org)).

2.1. Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership formulated by Burns (1978) exemplified by leaders such as Ms. Ardern emphasizes inspiration, motivation, and building trust among followers (Saad Alessa, 2021). Ardern's transparent communication and confidence-boosting measures during the pandemic exemplify this approach. One of its significant strengths lies in boosting morale and fostering collective effort (Saad Alessa, 2021). Leaders employing transformational strategies can create a shared vision, instilling a sense of purpose among employees, thereby enhancing their commitment and resilience amidst uncertainty hence encouraging followers to exceed expectations (Bass, 1985). However, transformational leadership exhibits limitations, particularly in rapidly changing situations like the COVID-19 pandemic. Its lack of organization might cause confusion when prompt and rapid decision-making is required. In unpredictable circumstances, employees may require clear guidelines and directives, which transformational leadership may struggle to provide, hindering effective

crisis management. Furthermore, since transformational leadership advocates taking risks as suggested by [Shafique and Beh \(2018\)](#), followers might resist rising concerns about personal safety, especially in emergency situations like the COVID-19 pandemic.

2.2. Situational Leadership Context

According to research, [Hersey and Blanchard's \(1982\)](#) situational leadership promotes adjusting leadership approaches to changing circumstances. This approach acknowledges that there is no one-size-fits-all solution and emphasizes flexibility in response to diverse challenges. Leaders' adept at situational leadership can assess the specific context and tailor their strategies accordingly. For instance, during the pandemic, leaders needed to adjust their approaches based on the severity of the crisis, regional differences in infection rates, and the varying impact on different sectors.

The strength of situational leadership lies in its adaptability, allowing leaders to respond effectively to the unique demands of each situation. However, its successful implementation requires accurate situational assessment, which can be challenging, especially when facing rapidly changing and complex scenarios. For example, [Hersey and Blanchard \(1982\)](#) suggest that an employee's readiness to complete the task or project should be tested before assigning it to them since they are not identical. This might delay decision making, especially in urgent situations as illustrated in [Figure 1](#) below.

2.3. Understanding Servant Leadership Context

Study suggests that servant leadership is inspired by the concept of aiding subordinates ([Greenleaf, 2002](#); [Khan et al., 2022a](#)), it focuses on employee well-being ([Kizilgac & Cerit, 2019](#); [Khan et al., 2020](#)) and support, fostering a supportive environment and building trust within the organization. Leaders adopting this approach prioritize the needs of their employees, aiming to create a positive workplace culture that promotes collaboration, empathy, and mutual respect. During the COVID-19 pandemic servant leadership gained prominence as organizations recognized the importance of employee mental and physical well-being. The strength of servant leadership lies in its emphasis on empathy and support, which can enhance employee engagement, satisfaction, and loyalty ([Spears, 1998](#); [Khan et al., 2022b](#)). By fostering a sense of belonging and demonstrating genuine concern for their well-being, leaders can build trust and strengthen the organizational culture. However, servant leadership faces challenges in balancing empathy with organizational objectives. While prioritizing employees' needs is crucial, leaders must also ensure that these efforts align with the organization's goals and sustainability. Striking this balance requires adept decision-making and a nuanced understanding of the interplay between employee well-being and organizational success. It is more than just securing organizational success. Only by changing with the times can organizations ensure their long-term viability.

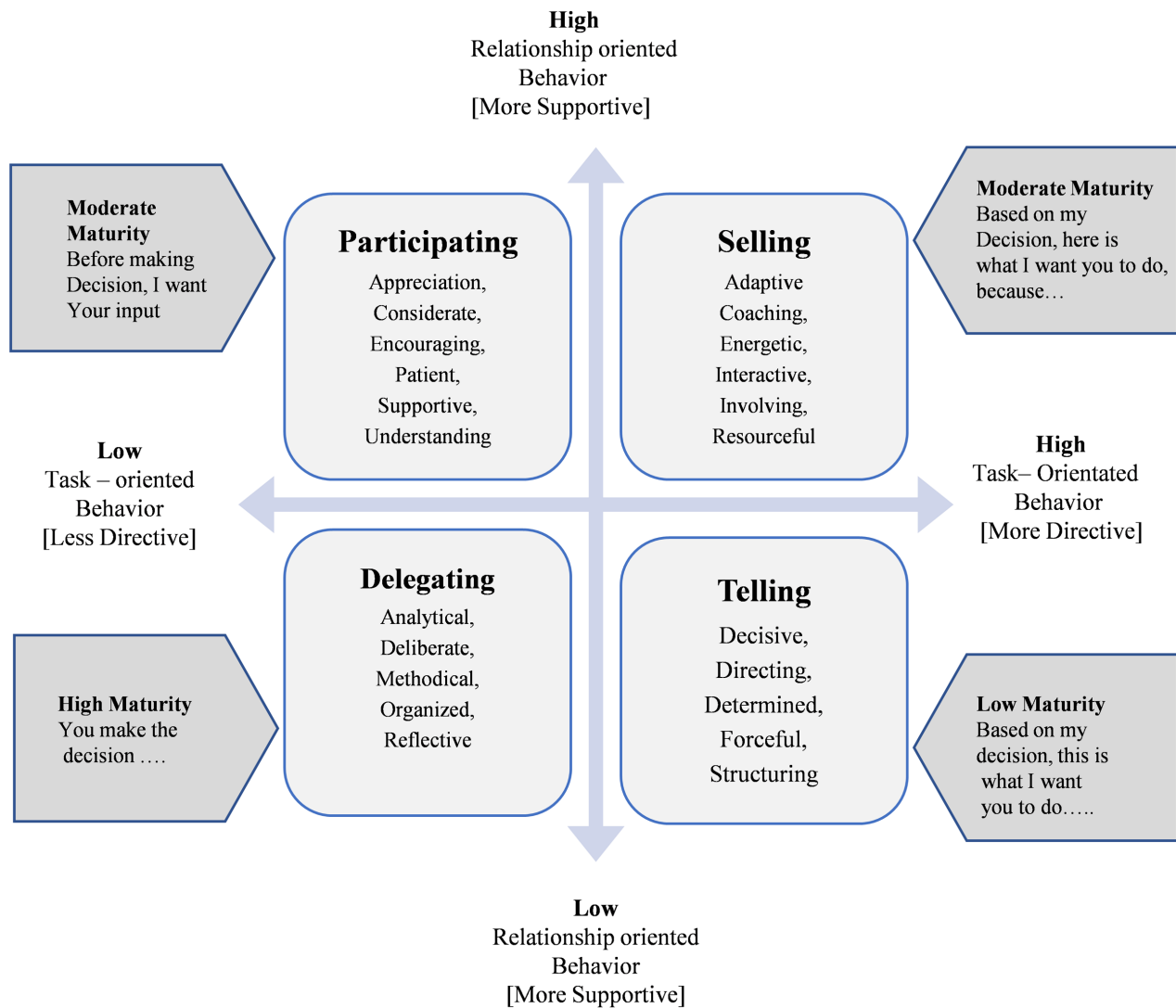


Figure 1. The Situational Leadership Model. Source: Arora & Baronikian (2013).

Optimal leadership can be attained through various models, such as Transformational, Situational, and Servant Leadership. Each model carries its own unique merits and obstacles, yet all underscore the significance of flexibility in sustaining the operational longevity of an organization amid shifting circumstances.

3. The Role of HR Theories and Models

The COVID-19 pandemic brought unprecedented challenges to organizations worldwide, forcing them to adapt swiftly to ensure business continuity calling for leaders to safeguard employee well-being (Chaudhary et al., 2022). In this context, the role of flexible leadership and understanding individual perspectives becomes paramount. Amidst the challenges of uncertainty and transformation that organizations face, HR models have emerged as a reliable framework for leaders to navigate and sustain employee engagement, mental health, and prod-

activity. The adoption of such models has become increasingly crucial for organizations to remain competitive and successful in the modern business landscape. The HR models provide a comprehensive approach to address various issues that can potentially hinder the growth and success of an organization. These models offer a structured and systematic approach to managing human capital, which can result in a more productive and engaged workforce. By leveraging HR models, organizations can create a positive work environment that fosters innovation, creativity, and collaboration. As such, HR models have become a valuable tool for leaders to maintain a competitive edge and drive success in their organizations.

This section evaluates the significance of flexible leadership and individual perspectives in managing change during the pandemic, drawing insights from relevant literature, tools, and techniques in the field of people management.

3.1. Flexible Leadership in Pandemic Management

Flexible leadership suggested by Yukl (2008) normally happens when unusual events happen, and this invites the ability of leaders to adapt their leadership style according to the evolving needs of the organization and its employees (Benzel, 2005). During the pandemic, organizations faced uncertainties, making it crucial for leaders to adopt flexible approaches. One major contemporary theoretical perspective on people management is Ulrich's HR business partner model (Mitsakis, 2014) which emphasizes seamless transitions to remote work and employee well-being initiatives. Study suggests that embracing technology is one way of boosting operational efficiency (Development and Learning in Organizations, 2021) hence aligning HR practices with business objectives, organizations can enhance their resilience, ensuring a smooth adaptation to changing circumstances.

3.2. Individual Perspectives and HR Theories

Understanding individual perspectives is essential in tailoring strategies to address employees' needs effectively, especially in crisis times like the COVID-19 pandemic. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Gaurav, 2010) and Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory provide valuable frameworks in this regard. Maslow's model suggests that individuals have hierarchical needs, ranging from basic physiological requirements to self-actualization. By recognizing these needs, leaders can tailor support initiatives, ensuring employees' well-being and job satisfaction. Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory distinguishes between hygiene factors such as working conditions and motivators such as recognition and growth opportunities (Robbins, 2009 cited in Yusoff et al., 2013). Effective people management, based on these theories, influences decision-making processes positively, leading to enhanced employee engagement and productivity.

The Pyramid (Figure 2) below illustrates Maslow's hierarchy of needs, starting with basic physiological requirements like food, water, and shelter. Security,

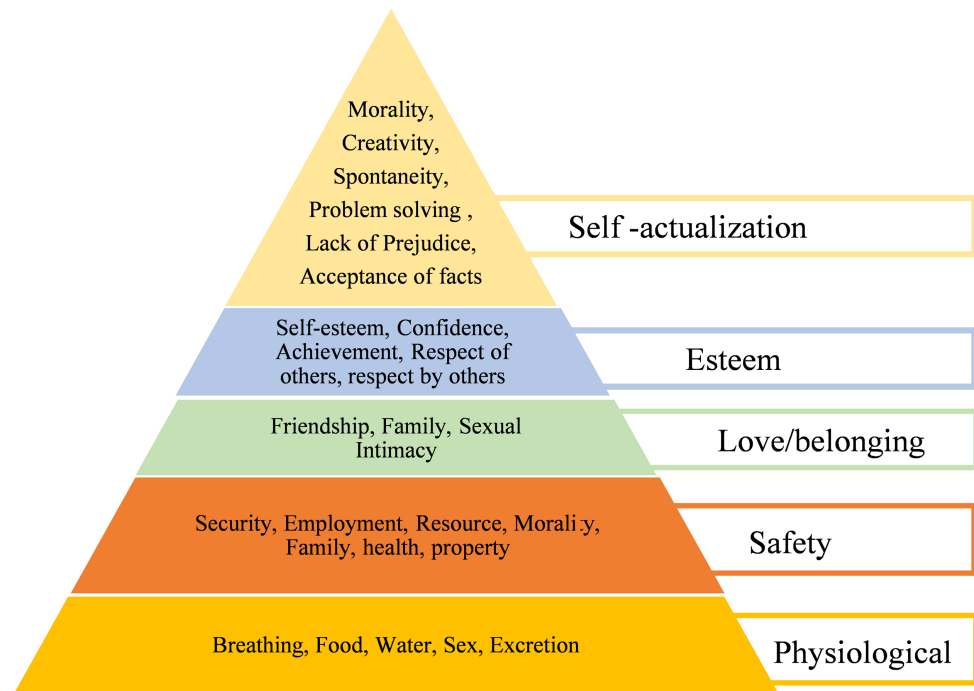


Figure 2. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs(Gaurav, 2010).

social belonging, and self-esteem follow, with the pinnacle being self-actualization, the pursuit of one's full potential. At this stage, intrinsic values like kindness and excellence drive individuals, fueling their quest for personal fulfillment and self-realization within social contexts and relationships. The theory explains that individuals prioritize fulfilling lower-level needs before higher-order aspirations. Understanding and addressing these needs are crucial for comprehending human motivation and designing effective strategies for personal development and societal well-being.

4. Application of HR Theories and Models in Pandemic Management

Human Resource professionals may use The David Ulrich Human Resource Model to plan and execute successful remote work strategies in close collaboration with organizational executives (Mitsakis, 2014).

This model emphasizes HR's strategic role in aligning human resources practices with business objectives, ensuring organizational adaptability. For instance, organizations can invest in technology, training, and mental health support, fostering a seamless transition to remote work environments. **Figure 3** illustrates Ulrich's HR model, depicting the dual axes of people-processes and strategic-operational emphasis.

Furthermore, the alignment of HR practices with business strategic objectives enhances organizational resilience. By focusing on employee well-being initiatives (Chaudhary et al., 2022) organizations can mitigate the negative impact of the pandemic on their workforce. For example, implementing flexible work hours,

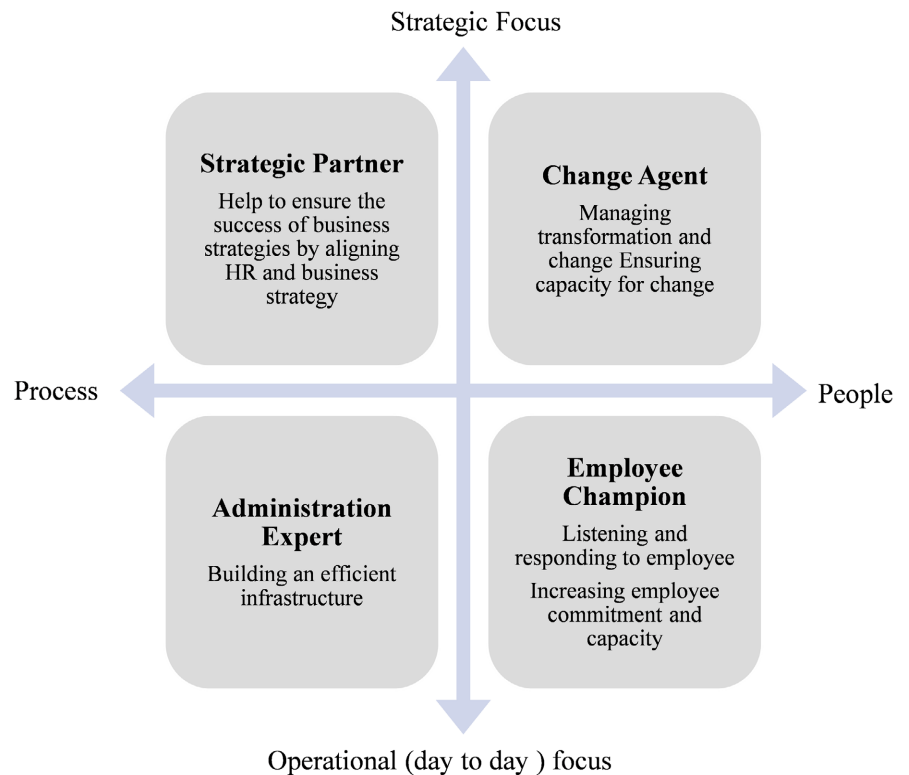


Figure 3. HR role model by Dave Ulrich (Ulrich, 1997).

providing mental health resources, and promoting a healthy work-life balance can significantly improve employees' morale and productivity, contributing to organizational resilience.

4.1. Tailoring Strategies Based on Individual Perspectives

Applying Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs suggested by Gaurav (2010) and Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory helps leaders tailor strategies to meet employees' specific needs. For instance, recognizing employees' physiological and safety needs (Maslow, 1969). Organizations can provide essential resources, such as protective equipment that were of great importance and remote work support. Addressing social and esteem needs, leaders can implement virtual team-building activities, recognition programs, and career development opportunities, fostering a sense of belonging and motivation among employees.

4.2. Impact on Stakeholders and Organizational Performance

Despite the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic posed unprecedented difficulties to global public health and caused a substantial loss of life, the World Health Organization (WHO) formally announced the end of the emergency phase in May 2023 (World Health Organization, 2023). Furthermore, it has disrupted conventional leadership paradigms, compelling an immediate reassessment of prevailing leadership approaches. In this section, the study scrutinizes the strategic importance of understanding leadership approaches during the pandemic

and their impact on stakeholders, emphasizing employee engagement and organizational performance. Drawing on relevant literature and contemporary examples, this analysis explores the intricate relationship between leadership, stakeholder satisfaction, and organizational success.

4.3. Employee Engagement

While remote work settings may present challenges to employee engagement effective leadership amidst the pandemic has been exemplified by leaders emphasizing employee safety, thereby cultivating trust and bolstering both morale and productivity (Leonard, 2023). Research indicates that leaders who actively address employee concerns create a supportive work environment, leading to increased engagement and satisfaction (Harter & Adkins, 2015). For instance, companies that swiftly implemented remote work options and provided necessary resources for employees to adapt to the new normal experienced higher-level engagement (Choudhury, 2020). This is crucial because increased engagement leads to improved morale, productivity, and job satisfaction. When leaders prioritize the well-being of their employees and create a supportive work environment, trust is cultivated, and employees feel valued. In turn, this not only boosts morale but also enhances productivity, contributing to the overall success and resilience of the organization during challenging times like the COVID-19 pandemic.

Conversely, leaders neglecting employee concerns witnessed decreased engagement and satisfaction, impacting overall productivity (Choudhury, 2020). Instances wherein organizations lacked transparent communication and failed to provide sufficient support to their employees during the crisis resulted in increased stress and diminished levels of engagement. This underscores the pivotal role of leadership in influencing the emotional well-being of the workforce, consequently impacting their engagement and overall organizational performance.

4.4. Organizational Performance

The relationship between leadership approaches and organizational performance is evident through the pandemic's lens. Effective decision-making and empathetic management of resources have proven essential for maintaining financial stability during turbulent times. Leaders who embraced innovative solutions adapted swiftly to changing market demands, and efficiently allocated resources demonstrated resilience and ensured organizational sustainability.

A study by Arif and Akram (2018) found that transformational leadership, characterized by inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration, and idealized influence, positively influenced organizational performance metrics such as productivity, innovation, and employee satisfaction. Alternatively, leaders who exhibit a combination of transformational and transactional leadership styles can significantly impact organizational effectiveness, leading to improved financial performance and employee engagement.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, effective leadership, particularly transformational and transactional leadership styles, became critically important. Transformational leadership, with its focus on inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration, and idealized influence, played a crucial role in maintaining employee morale and motivation amidst unprecedented challenges. Leaders who could inspire and guide their teams through uncertainties fostered a sense of unity and purpose. Additionally, transactional leadership, which involves clear communication and goal setting, became vital for managing immediate and pressing issues. The combination of both styles proved effective in navigating the complexities of the pandemic, leading to improved organizational performance, financial stability, and enhanced employee engagement, all essential factors for weathering the challenges posed by COVID-19 pandemic.

4.5. Impact on Stakeholders

Leadership approaches during the COVID-19 pandemic had far-reaching implications for stakeholders, including employees, customers, investors, and communities as the pandemic had a great impact. Transparent communication via social media that indicated rise in usage empathy, and a proactive approach to addressing stakeholder concerns were crucial (Donthu & Gustafsson, 2020). Companies with leaders who demonstrated empathy towards stakeholders and communicated openly about their strategies and challenges garnered trust and loyalty. During the COVID-19 pandemic, transparent and empathetic leadership was crucial in building trust, reducing uncertainty, and demonstrating care for stakeholders. This approach fosters loyalty, positive relationships, and organizational resilience, ensuring better outcomes during challenging times.

For example, companies that actively engaged with their customers, understanding their evolving needs and concerns, were able to tailor their products and services effectively. This proactive approach not only retained customer loyalty but also facilitated the development of new business opportunities. Similarly, organizations that prioritized investor relations and communicated transparently about their crisis management plans instilled confidence, ensuring continued support from investors.

5. Recommendations

Following an in-depth analysis presented in this report, it becomes apparent that effective leadership and change management (Belias & Koustelios, 2014) play pivotal roles in successfully navigating the intricacies of the COVID-19 pandemic. The dynamic interplay between various leadership approaches, theoretical frameworks, and managerial perspectives offers invaluable insights to organizations seeking to enhance their people management strategies during tumultuous times. Therefore, the report proposes the following recommendations for leaders and organizations confronting similar challenges.

5.1. Embrace Adaptive Leadership

Leaders must adopt adaptive leadership strategies that enable flexibility and prompt decision making in response to evolving circumstances (Mirčetić & Vukotic, 2020). Drawing inspiration from the situational leadership model (Figure 1), it is imperative to evaluate employee readiness and capabilities, thereby allowing leaders to customize their approaches accordingly. By embracing adaptability, organizations can effectively address diverse challenges and ensure swift crisis management.

5.2. Cultivate a Culture of Empathy

Servant leadership, emphasizing empathy and support (Greenleaf, 2002 cited in Khan, et al., 2022a), should be deeply ingrained in the fabric of organizational cultures. Leaders need to prioritize employee well-being (Kizilgac & Cerit, 2019), acknowledging the individual perspectives delineated in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Gaurav, 2010) and Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory (Yusoff et al., 2013). By comprehending and addressing the specific needs of employees, organizations can nurture a sense of belonging, motivation, and loyalty among their workforce (Robbins, 2009 cited in Yusoff et al., 2013). This empathetic approach enhances employee engagement and contributes to organizational resilience.

5.3. Enhance Communication and Transparency

Transparent communication, especially during crises, holds paramount importance. Leaders should actively engage with various stakeholders, including employees, customers, investors, and communities. Open communication channels serve as the bedrock for building trust and loyalty, enabling organizations to collaboratively overcome challenges. Harnessing the potential of social media platforms, as indicated by their increased usage during the pandemic, can facilitate real-time communication and amplify stakeholder engagement (Donthu & Gustafsson, 2020). Without clear information, rumors and misinformation may fill the void, further eroding confidence in leadership. Employees may feel disconnected, customers could lose faith in the organization, and investors may become wary. Overall, the absence of communication and transparency during crises can harm relationships, hinder collaboration, and impede the organization's ability to navigate challenges effectively.

5.4. Emphasize Employee Engagement Initiatives

Investing in initiatives that elevate employee engagement in remote work settings is essential. Proactive measures such as virtual team-building activities, recognition programs, and career development opportunities can bridge the gap created by physical distance. Leaders should proactively address employee concerns, providing the necessary resources and support to ensure a positive work environment. Engaged employees exhibit increased productivity, making sub-

stantial contributions to organizational success (Bakker & Albrecht, 2018).

5.5. Align HR Practices with Strategic Objectives

HR professionals should take on a strategic role in crisis management. By aligning HR practices with the overarching business objectives, organizations can seamlessly transition to remote work environments and implement initiatives aimed at employee well-being. Investments in technology, training, and mental health support enhance organizational adaptability and resilience. Collaboration between HR and organizational leaders, following Ulrich's HR business partner model can facilitate strategic HR interventions and ensure the continuity of business operations (Mitsakis, 2014).

The COVID-19 pandemic has necessitated a reevaluation of leadership paradigms, highlighting the significance of adaptive, empathetic, and transparent approaches. By embracing these principles and integrating them into the cultural fabric of organizations, leaders can not only navigate crises effectively but also cultivate sustainable growth and resilience. As we progress into the future, the lessons gleaned from this unprecedented challenge should serve as guiding principles for leaders, shaping a future where organizations thrive in the face of uncertainty for sustainable business (Gracey, 2020).

6. Conclusion

This report has shed light into the intricate dynamics of leadership approaches in the face of the unprecedented challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The study has scrutinized diverse strategies employed by leaders and critically evaluated contemporary theoretical frameworks and managerial perspectives. The research has provided valuable insights, shedding light on the relevance and application of flexible leadership, individual perspectives, and servant leadership during the pandemic. It has also highlighted the role of HR theories and models in managing change and ensuring organizational resilience. Additionally, it has brought attention to the importance of HR models such as Ulrich's HR model and theories such as the Situational Leadership Model in change management and organizational resilience.

The central findings of this report emphasize the pivotal role of leadership in times of crisis and its profound impact on various stakeholders, including employees, customers, investors, and communities. Effective leadership has been demonstrated to foster employee engagement, satisfaction, and productivity, while also enhancing organizational performance and adaptability. Transparent communication, empathy, and adaptive leadership have emerged as key principles for guiding organizations through tumultuous times.

The recommendations provided in this report offer a practical roadmap for leaders and organizations navigating similar challenges. Embracing adaptive leadership, cultivating a culture of empathy, enhancing communication and transparency, emphasizing employee engagement initiatives, and aligning HR prac-

tices with strategic objectives are all essential steps in ensuring organizational resilience and success.

As we move forward into an uncertain future, the lessons learned from this pandemic should serve as a foundation for leadership practices that prioritize flexibility, empathy, and adaptability. These principles are essential for organizations to not only survive but thrive in the face of unprecedented challenges, fostering a sustainable and resilient business environment. This report contributes to our understanding of effective leadership during crises and provides valuable guidance for leaders and organizations as they navigate the complex intersection of the global business environment.

The study is limited by challenges related to real-time data availability and the dynamic nature of the COVID-19 crisis, affecting the precision and comprehensiveness of the findings. Additionally, the research is constrained by its exclusive focus on leadership strategies associated with the pandemic, which restricts the generalizability of the study's conclusions.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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