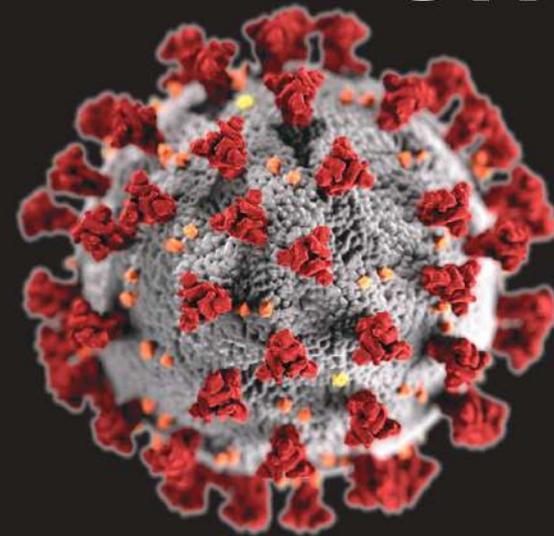


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LEADING THROUGH THE COVID 19 CRISIS



Editor
Siti Sarah Omar
Nurul Fadzilla Mohd Aris



Leading through the COVID-19 Crisis

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Editors:

**SITI SARAH OMAR
NURUL FADZILLA MOHD ARIS**

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List of Contributors

Abdul Rahman Ahmad
Dahlia Fernandez Mohd Farid Fernandez
Farah Adibah Ahmad Effendi
Fazian Hashim
Mohd Asmadi Mohd Angsor
Mohd Khairulamiren Md Ramin
Mohd Nazir Mohd Adi
Nazarudin Bujang
Noor Aslinda Abu Seman
Nur Izzati Hasrul
Nurul Fadzilla Mohd Aris
Nurul Syahirra Azman
Rabiatuladawiyah Masruhan
Siti Sarah Omar
Siti Sarawati Johar
Umi Kartini Rashid

Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia (UTHM)

Nomahaza Mahadi

Universiti Teknologi Malaysia Kuala Lumpur (UTMKL)

Anang Kistyanto

Universitas Negeri Surabaya (UNESA)

PREFACE

First and foremost, we would like to extend our gratitude and appreciation to all the contributors for making possible the publication of this book chapter entitled *Leading Through the COVID-19 Crisis*. This book chapter is produced as an effort to address the importance of leading effectively and how to mobilize human capital through leadership approaches during volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA) time, especially in the pandemic COVID-19 period. This book chapter consists of eight chapters contributed by academic staffs and students from various universities in Malaysia and abroad.

The focus of this book chapter is on employee leadership and management during the worldwide health crisis that resulted from the COVID-19 virus pandemic. Effective leadership theory, the implications of COVID-19 on businesses and people, the assessment of employees' emotional and behavioral shifts, and strategic methods to lead employees throughout the pandemic are all explored. Additionally, the book examines in greater detail the practical approaches that have been proposed by academics to address the absence of effective employee leadership, both from a corporate perspective and from the perspective of the employees.

3

LEADING EMPLOYEES EFFECTIVELY DURING PANDEMIC COVID-19: THE LEADER'S TRAITS

Mohd Khairulamiren Md Ramin
Siti Sarah Omar
Anang Kistyanto
Mohd Asmadi Mohd Angsor

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Leadership has evolved throughout the periods, with different situations and challenges suitable to those particular periods. Johnson and Heckman (2018) have defined leadership as a basic element in human life based on thinking from ancient philosophers, historians, and even scientists such as Confucius, Plato, and Machiavelli. As part of human nature, leadership is not only centralized on the talent, but style, behavior, and response in leadership should be focused as well on the development of the skills. Stepping into the 20th century, to lead an organization or a team from various backgrounds is a tough task entrusted upon a big persona – a leader. The year 2020 is celebrated with joyous, bright expectations, especially for business players. However, the COVID-19 pandemic, which started to mess up all the plans, has caused the biggest impact that no one can ever imagine. COVID-19, which is a new virus that was discovered in Wuhan back in December 2019, threatening the whole planet. Many nations in the world have shown leadership agenda by taking immediate actions to mitigate the spread of the virus during the early stage of the outbreak (Hamouche, 2020).

The unprecedented move taken by any business players during pandemic mode is essential to meet the demand of the supply chain besides ensuring the well-being of their employees are safeguarded (Dirani et al., 2020). Obviously, employees who contribute to the continuity of any business organization's survival will be directly affected by the pandemic. According to Tovmasyan and Minasyan (2020), the impact from COVID-19 will influence both employers' and employees' motivation on work efficiency, including employees' physical and mental health status (Bader, Reade & Froese, 2016). Two different factors, extrinsic and intrinsic, are domineering sources to drive motivation, especially to employees (Tovmasyan & Minasyan, 2020). Turner (2017) also stresses that the motivation of employees is directly affected by the organization's performance. While few

would argue about the hardship and obstacles they go through, leaders are the ones who will face more. Stoller (2020), in his commentary, insisted that this pandemic was a reflection of the leaders on their leadership. Indeed, this crisis is a test for the leadership of a leader towards employees while accelerating work performance. According to Bhaduri (2019), effective crisis management is an integral element in leadership as the practice will go beyond normal activities that must be delivered during the crisis.

This chapter reviews highlight the roles of a leader to test their competencies in leadership, specifically after the pandemic hit globally. We will look into the characteristics a leader should emphasize that will be further discussed in the following section, which is trust, communication, and optimism, while defining how these characteristics may affect the performance and link the cooperation between leader and employees.

3.2 BUILD TRUST BETWEEN LEADERS AND EMPLOYEES

Crisis such as the current pandemic generally affects the needs of humans. A competent leader who tries to maintain a good relationship during a crisis is able to enjoy the fruits as a mutual trust has already been formed long before the crisis (Johnson, 2018). It has been considered a crucial element for leaders to win employees' trust so that the employees are able to improve their work effectiveness (Hsieh & Wang, 2015). In the pandemic era, work progress may be disrupted due to a few factors such as connectivity, health conditions, and the environment. As a result of the connectivity issue, a drop in productivity towards work performance has to be considered. During the pandemic, work from home (WFH) is the most popular method adopted by employers to curb the spread of the virus (Messacar et al., 2020). The feasibility of working at home rather than at the office is a consequence of the economic lockdown (Messacar et al., 2020), which started to be lifted in phases according to the type of economy and services offered.

For employees, the opportunity to work from home does not necessarily bring more benefits, as they may need to consider their capacity to cope with the norm. Russo (2015) stated that employees are transitioning to juggle between work interests, required to be updated or submitted when necessary and personal resources, skills, traits, or conflicts. Accumulation of tons of work and personal conditions at home may cause various threats to the employees. To bring balance between works and personal, coming to the role of effective leaders to ease the flow and lighten their employees' burden. Leaders who introduce focused strategies to nourish employees' performance, especially psychological traits, are able to aid their employees in counteracting negativity in completing the tasks (Russo, 2015).

Practicing team leadership style is essential in this hard situation. As a leader, surely the objectives and goals of the organization are required to be met. Therefore, the most effective approach to tackling this issue is respecting and caring for the employees' needs (Fliegel et al., 2016). Leaders have to always diagnose and monitor the situation surrounding the employees, which may affect the quality, performance, and deliverability of the tasks. Intervention is required to stabilize the situation after a thorough analysis has been considered (Fliegel et al., 2016). When the leaders open themselves to situations of their employees, the leaders are actually now trying to

build a close but professional relationship with the employees which the Leader-member exchange (LMX) theory suggested (Qu et al., 2015).

Constraints and hardships faced by employees during COVID-19 are unimaginable and different from one another to another. The leader's task is to ensure the motivation of employees is at the optimum level where leaders can apply three different motivation theories; Alderfer's Existence-Relatedness-Growth (ERG), Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, and Herzberg's Two Factor Theory (Kriek, 2018). These three theories are three classical-based motivational theories besides few other theories that can be attained on employees. A leader who is able to apply motivational theory then maintain a good leader-employee relationship will successfully grab employees' trust. Trust is a willingness to rely on the other party's competence and belief that the other party will not exploit weaknesses for their own advantage (Kistyanto et al., 2021). Furthermore, Kistyanto (2021) explained the trust dimensions include competence, integrity, dependability or reliability, openness and honesty, and satisfaction. Evans (2015), in his book "Leadership trust: build it, keep it", defines trust as "An assurance that lets people manage risk in their relationships with others." This powerful element will put the leader in a concrete point in which employees are comfortable to share their thoughts and necessity. Evans (2015) also stated that trust is to be given in order to be earned in return. Employees' action to trust their leader can be represented as a risk that will have a greater impact on the former if the trust is breached (Evans, 2015). Furthermore, leaders have been designed to be trusted by their employees with ample supply and resources that can satisfy the needs and objectives of both employees and the organization.

Over the years, researchers from different fields have developed trust-building models considering various factors, from three key perspectives emphasizing that the trust-building process is dependent on the trustee's characteristics (e.g. ability, benevolence, integrity, credibility, etc.), rationality (e.g. calculations, cost/benefit, technology, etc.) and institutions (e.g. contracts, agreements, control mechanisms, security, etc.), assuming that the trustor will perceive or evaluate them positively (Laequddin et al., 2012). In his book, Evans (2015) further stated the three essential elements in upholding the value of trustworthiness that help the practitioner, especially in the leader-employee relationship, focus on the aspects of behavior, individual and performance; ability, integrity, and loyalty. During the pandemic, some leaders probably have doubts about their employees' ability to complete the tasks considering each employee's ability is different. The situation has always influenced the trust made by leaders who make a judgement about the ability of the employees (Evans, 2015). A charismatic and trusted leader will bind with his/her employees by showing role model behavior and presenting a sense of belonging (Tortola & Pansardi, 2019) due to trust. For instance, employees who are required to do their work at home to curb the spread of the virus have to deliver within a stipulated time. Here, leaders put their trust in employees to fulfill the commitment while the employees have to realize the expectation. This can only be achieved after mutual trust between leader and employees has been successfully tied in the early stage of team formation. Both leaders and employees have to tolerate with each other so they are able to execute their work effectively. This kind of relationship will develop the sense of belonging as the support system to build a strong engagement and foundation to the good managing

organization and fulfill the team member's needs to perform in all given tasks. Therefore, the conflict between leader and employees is now being minimized as the trust issue has now been mitigated to become the core subject of the team to move forward.

3.3 EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

Communication is an art that requires skills to master blending with smart and dynamic leadership. From the perspective of Johnson and Heckman (2018), communication is a fundamental activity of leadership as more time and energy spent by the leader to deliver messages, speech, and advice to their employees. Ruben and Stewart (2019) have summarized a description from philosopher, Aristotle, about communication where it is actually an activity through verbal with the aim to convince listeners by having skillful argument and speech deliverability. Strategic communication is essential when facing a crisis. Crisis management is directly affected by effective communication between leaders, employees, and stakeholders (Arnett et al., 2017) to avoid unwanted impact on all key players and organizations. Arnett et al. (2017) have suggested that the link between smart leadership and strategic communication offers a great deal in determining the organization's bright future through the engagement of leaders and employees. The relationship between leader and employees becomes the main element to be prioritized as these communities are looking forward to guidance, while the leader in this time has to show his/her authenticity to help the organization and employees overcome fear and discomfort (Dirani et al., 2020). Leaders should also have knowledge of virtual communication techniques, while face-to-face communication is now limited and has to be done at a distance (Newman & Ford, 2021). Relaying information to the employees will help them undergo the crisis calmly as a lot of assumptions and thinking come to their mind on how their fate will be affected and what will happen to the organization they are working with (Klann, 2003). These types of thinking and assumptions come across to their mind are due to low morale and economic recession (Mani & Mishra, 2020). In some study conducted to know the need for communication between leader and employees, (Dirani et al., 2020) has highlighted the needs from the employees' side; the importance of transparency, resources information to deal with stress and anxiety for their mental health and acknowledgment from the leader about the difficulty. The ability to address these issues and offer some suggestions to the employees through effective communication in order for them to improve their well-being will push forward the performance of both employees and the organization.

According to Ruben (2019), leadership and communication are always interdependent as they are related to specific situations in which have a certain impact associated with these two. With the aim to relay information to the receivers through various channels, the contents are undeniable can easily be understood and processed (Ruben, 2019). Communication is not only limited to the medium used to relay information but includes the selection of language, skills adapted when initiating communication, and tone used in conversation (Churchman, 2016). Effective communication from leaders stimulates the sense and spirits of the employees, especially those who are badly affected by COVID-19. Most employees react differently during crisis time, which varies in terms of acceptance to change, emotional behavior, and workloads (Dirani et al., 2020). There

should be a balance between logic and emotion in the communication between leaders and employees. A blending of logic and emotion in communication requires skills to set the competencies of the leader in successfully approaching, analyzing, and understanding the employees' situation (Johnson & Heckman, 2018). The core task for a leader during this type of crisis is to frequently listen, taking opinion and considerations from employees, asking their latest situation and well-being besides convincing them that the organization is always open to help. Such approaches will help to motivate the employees to stay positive going through this pandemic.

Talking about communication, selection of language is essential to motivate not to depress the listeners. The discipline of choosing the right language and words should not be taken for granted, as it portrays the maturity and professionalism of every single person in the organization. Churchman (2016), in his book, has highlighted the right use of language is to minimize communication disputes, which may lead to misunderstanding then tarnish the reputation of an organization. Expressive language is recommended to be used by leaders to the employees who face difficulties during COVID-19. The skills adapted by the leader when initiating communication rely on the manner, situation, and preparedness to equip empathy in the conversation (Ruben, 2019). Suggestion to the leader who has trouble to approach his/her employees who are in crisis is by arranging the sentence in an orderly manner that can be accepted by listeners. Another method is always practicing the line to avoid awkwardness and nervous especially to those who just started to practice effective communication skills. For instance, the leader can start to practice talking in front of a mirror or his/her own family to know the effectiveness of the selection of the words or even the right tone when talking. However, leaders are not entangled to use the words that he/she has been practiced but the modification is acceptable as long as the employees who will listen to the words are understood. The outcome from this activity is magnificent as it helps to boost up the employees' spirit, besides the relationship between leader and employees becomes closer.

In order to stay connected during COVID-19, Newman and Ford (2021) have listed two methods which are leader has to have a one-to-one individual call or video meetings with each employee and conduct weekly meetings with all team members within the employees. Continuous communication between leader and employees must be held at a convenient time agreed by both parties because some of them may entangle with some responsibilities at home which requires flexibility. The significance of these activities is to ensure all employees are being appreciated and being disciplined to the jobs. Leaders who give thorough attention and respond to each doubt and problems shows that he/she upholds the value of respect and manage to bring the employees to achieve the organization's goals (Newman & Ford, 2021). Once the leader emphasizes communication tools and techniques, the employees who work outside the office feel closer to the organization's goals and mission (Newman & Ford, 2021).

3.4 REALISTIC AND OPTIMISTIC

Prior to having effective communication with the employees, the leader now needs to be realistic and optimistic in any situation and circumstances being encountered. New norm is totally different

from the previous state as well as this pandemic has huge impacts on the organization as an institution that provides medium to work and employees as the driver to reach the missions and objectives of the organization. For an organization, it is an opportunity for a leader to outshine his/her leadership skills during this pandemic and to bring the company out from the crisis successfully in the future (Dirani et al., 2020). From the perspective of strategic marketing, a pandemic can also be a competitive advantage (Newman & Ford, 2021) for the organization to stay relevant in the business and to create more customer loyalty ahead of other competitors in terms of management, new product introduction, and product positioning in the market. To deliver all objectives, missions, and opportunities that the organization gained during a pandemic, leaders in the organization have to acknowledge some difficulties from the standpoint of employees. There must be some issues to be addressed by the employees in the journey of accomplishing their work. All problems and comments voiced out by the employees have to be entertained accordingly because, at the end of the day, the work delivered must be in lieu of the missions and objectives of the organization. No one should be left behind to bring success to the organization that they are working with. Since optimism is one form of competitive advantage, it is an added value, especially to the leader of the organization. Both leaders and employees who do not have optimism would easily give up before reaching the goal of the team and the organization due to all struggles, difficulties, fear, and negativity along the journey (Gordon, 2017). Optimism is the key factor for everyone in the organization to stay disciplined and keep moving forward without hesitation.

During the pandemic, surely there are some changes that will be introduced by the organization to suit the current situation with the employees and job requirements. There should be some policies to allow the employees to work away from the office, which consists of objectives, time, or procedures to be followed. In return, if there are none of these stated in an organization's policies, it becomes the responsibility of the leader to outline the policies to define his/her expectations then share them with the employees for the acknowledgment (Newman & Ford, 2021). However, the policies outlined must be realistic with the current situation as the employees are now in the process to adapt to the new norm. How does the leader will know that the policies he/she created is realistic and achievable? The only way is to look into the performance of the employees to do their jobs in this pandemic. If the leader finds the policies introduced are not suitable, the leader may take action by actively inviting the employees to share their ideas and opinions on the improvement of the policies, although the end results still on leader's hands to decide (Halaychik, 2016). Halaychik (2016) further elaborated in his book, this type of leadership style allows the employees to develop their skills and knowledge as their leader has put trust on them to diversify the viewpoints from every angle of concerns and hierarchy in the organization.

Consequently, a leader's action to include his/her employees proves that the leader is optimistic with their team members' capability to solve the issues they encounter. A leader's belief and optimism are important to be shared with the employees to transform the team and the organization (Gordon, 2017). At the end of the day, an optimistic leader can spread positivity to the employees as the leader is already engulfed with this mindset. Everyone may view all challenges they face during COVID-19 are a burden that they are struggling to overcome. By looking at the adversities on the positive side, the misfortune can be changed into a fortune for

those who can see it (Gordon, 2017). As a leader, please bear in mind that hardships will be along the journey to disturb the smoothness of the process. Once the leader is realistic with the challenges and optimistic about mitigating them, then only the leader can share their belief with their employees to influence the employees' self-esteem. A well-known positive leadership style persona, the infamous American football coach, Pete Carroll, as once said that he must share his optimism with his team members, which future will be better than the present as the cynical world that people live intend to influence the people's mind and behavior (Gordon, 2017). This designation of thinking is essential to instill self-development among the employees who bring along with them the mission of their organization. For a leader, to believe in the employees causes them to be more proactive and shows optimism towards the jobs (Newman & Ford, 2021). An optimistic leader will see hidden values that everyone cannot see; something that is impossible can be turned into possible, execute belief into reality (Gordon, 2017). At the same time, this type of leader will encourage his/her employees to plan then complete their works for future success even the situation seems uncertain globally. The challenges become the agent for the leader to envision for the future that offers benefits to the employees and organization. All in all, it is a basic requirement for a leader to value leadership competencies through success and failure, especially during this pandemic (Stoller, 2020).

3.5 CONCLUSION

In this pandemic, a leader who has the following leadership elements; trustworthiness, excellent communication skills, and a realistic and optimistic mind can lead the team successfully without bothering the obstacles that may come forward later. A good relationship between leaders and employees has now become stronger as they put trust in each other to achieve the mission and objectives of the organization. Then, it helps to mitigate any issue that may affect the professionalism among themselves. Excellent communication skills will reduce the gap of connection between the leader and employees. The communication methods to approach affected employees will ensure the employees feel appreciated and motivated. COVID-19 has also provided a platform for the leader to stay optimistic and realistic to lead the employees. This is to ease the burdens uphold by both parties in order to ensure all jobs are completely done.

Lastly, this pandemic should be seen as an opportunity for the leader to outshine his/her capabilities, competencies, and skills in leadership. The things that the leader learns and responds from the pandemic will be useful to be applied post-pandemic. Leaders are now prepared to take more challenges; providing the experience to manage the team during a crisis is tougher compared to normal situation. This can further enhance the quality and performance of the team in completing their tasks while achieving the mission and objectives of the organization.

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