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ARTICLE



Leadership competencies and the essential role of human resource development in times of crisis: a response to Covid-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to investigate the roles of domestic and global leaders and organizations to COVID-19 and to consider the new role(s) of Human Resource Development (HRD) based on the ramifications of pandemics in general, and COVID-19 in particular. The research questions guiding this work are: What are the leadership competencies required during and post times of crisis? And What roles do human resource development practitioners envision to support their organizations during and post times of crisis? In this manuscript, we provide several themes, based on the literature and case studies from international and domestic contexts, that we see as essential competencies for leadership practices in response to a global crisis. We explored leadership competencies required in the time of crises, followed by exploring cases of best practices of leadership in different contexts, followed by reflections on new roles for HRD researchers and practitioners post a global crisis.

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Introduction

The current COVID-19 global health crisis is unprecedented. It is considered as one of the turning points in history where it is shuffling social and economic norms as we know them and is triggering a new human era. The magnitude and speed of collapse in different activities that have followed are unlike anything experienced in our lifetime (Gopinath 2020). For example, the crisis has caused hundreds of thousands of fatalities, tested the limits of health systems, and has put the world in a great lockdown where the global economy is experiencing the worst recession since the great depression (Gopinath 2020). With social, economic, and health systems on the verge of collapsing, it is impossible to know what the new world will look like, but its shape will depend on the decisions leaders make now.

Governments, communities, and organizations are in crisis mode and are looking for guidance from their leaders. The challenge is that our worldviews of the order of things, what we thought we knew about the order of systems, is falling apart and this could lead

to a breakdown or a breakthrough of our organizations, entities, and systems and it all depends on our leaders. How leaders respond to the crisis could permanently shift the economic, social, and health foundations of their communities. Some of these leaders will rise to the challenge while others will fade away. This is the time for authentic leaders to help systems and individuals overcome limitations and fears and boost their performance.

Building on this introduction, this paper is an immediate response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose is to investigate reactions and responses of domestic and global leaders and organizations to COVID-19 and to consider the new role(s) of Human Resource Development (HRD) based on the ramifications of pandemics in general, and COVID-19 in particular. The research questions guiding this work are:

- (1) What are the leadership competencies required during and post times of crisis?
- (2) What roles do HRD practitioners envision to support their organizational leaders during and post times of crisis?

In this manuscript, we provide several themes, based on the literature and case studies from international and domestic contexts, that we see as essential competencies for leadership practices in response to a global crisis. In the following sections we explore leadership competencies required in the times of crises, and provide cases of best practices of leadership in different contexts, followed by exploring roles for HRD practitioners to support leaders adapt to the new norms in the age of COVID-19. We conclude with reflections on HRD research and practice post a global crisis.

Leadership competencies in times of crisis

Over the years, researchers have honed down a general set of best practices that exemplary leaders follow in normal times. For example, Kausner and Posner (2012) analysed thousands of best leadership practices and uncovered five practices common to leadership best practices that leaders engage in and get extraordinary things done in organizations. Table 1 details the five practices along with their definitions.

The current pandemic appears to be an ultimate test for leadership across the world. While some have risen to the occasion, others are struggling to manage this crisis of

Table 1. Five practices common to personal-best leadership practices.

Leadership Practice*	Operating definition
Model the Way	Clarifying values and setting the example through: finding own voice, affirming and personifying shared values, and reflection on action.
Inspire a Shared Vision	Envisioning the future through: imagining the possibilities, finding a common purpose, and enlisting others by appealing to common ideals and animating the vision.
Challenge the Process	Searching for opportunities and taking risk through: seizing initiatives, exercising oversight, generating small wins, and learning from experience.
Enable Others to Act	Fostering collaboration and strengthening others through: creating a climate of trust, facilitating relationships, enhancing self-determination, and developing competence and confidence.
Encourage the Heart	Recognizing contributions and celebrating values and victories through: expecting the best, personalizing recognition, creating a spirit of community, and being personally involved.

*Adopted from: Kausner and Posner (2012), *The Leadership Challenge (5th Edition)*. Jossey Bass.

unprecedented proportions. Organizational leaders are relying on their instincts and insights, provided by human resource professionals, to ensure their organization and employees feel supported. News and social media have exposed us to how some leaders are failing in their endeavours to save organizations and jobs. Miller and Berk (2020) reported that by early spring 2020, 561 organizations have filed for bankruptcy in the United States, of which 51 are retail organizations (Danziger 2020). These numbers are expected to keep rising throughout the year, and what is missing is the lack of preparedness among leaders to deal with a crisis of this scale, duration, and complexity.

Just like their communities, organizations are in crisis mode. They struggle to meet the basic requirements of their customers while ensuring the well-being of their staff. From an HRD academic perspective, the whole world is currently under a hostile environment. Research studies on global calamities, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, have explored the risks, crisis situations and hazardous environments present to organizational and leadership practices from a range of perspectives (McNulty et al. 2019). These include the impact of dangerous situations on employee performance and employee turnover (Bader, Reade, and Froese 2019), employee discrimination and hostility (Bader et al. 2018), and employee physical and psychological health such as work environment, workload, and work-life balance (Bader, Reade, and Froese 2019; Faeth and Kittler 2017). It is worth mentioning that while crisis-related organizational and leadership research has focused on man-made threats such as crime and civil unrest, little is known about leadership challenges and organizational outcomes emerging from other types of threat (Fee 2017) including the COVID-19 threats.

Crisis effect on employees

Boin (2005) reviewed the crisis literature and declared that a crisis can destabilize the organization and its workers. In this situation organizations have to work under stress which leads to remarkable challenges for business leaders. The main challenges have been addressed as ‘unreliable information, situational novelty, unclear and shifting goals, and ill-structured situations’ (Kayes, Allen, and Self 2017, 277). These challenges cause a sharp increase in employee layoffs (Adkins et al. 2001).

While human resources’ value is not measurable like financial capital, HRD scholars view employees as one of the most valuable assets that can lead the organization to success (Jacobs 1990; Kurian 2018; Muduli 2015; Snell, Youndt, and Wright 1996). Losing good employees means losing the knowledge whereas keeping them can help organizations retain knowledge and experience (Ramlall 2004). Naudé (2012) affirmed that during unstable times, deliberate goal planning should be directed towards retaining high performers and using their skills to preserve a high level of productivity. Many organizations also try to reduce the number of employees to minimize their costs during the crisis, and at the same time expect greater resilience from remaining employees (Naudé 2012).

Employees respond differently during times of crisis as discrete individuals behave differently to change with reactions varying from acceptance to change, minor discomfort, fear, anger, frustration, and even full resistance (Smollan, Sayers, and Matheny 2010). Wang, Anne, and McLean (2016) interviewed 66 individuals from India to identify how participants respond to crisis. They found that, while individuals’ responses to crises

were different, employees could be categorized into three main groups. The first group includes employees who try to stay active and fight throughout the crisis. The second group includes those who accept the situation and compromise. And the third group would rely on faith as a source of their strength during the crisis. Naudé (2012) found that employees tend to complain less about labour violations during the crisis due to fear of losing their jobs.

What do employees need at this time?

At the time of crisis, organizations are likely to experience unimaginable disruptions. Leader's main focus would be to reopen, recover the business, and begin crisis management mode. As a result, employees may be at most risk in a number of ways. They might go through traumatic experiences, they will need to learn how to deal with complexity, how to adapt to the new reality of work, and they will need emotional and interpersonal support. In the following sections, we will discuss the significance of supervisory support, psychological empowerment, positive reinforcement and appreciation of work, and communication from the leaders during these unprecedented times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

HRD support

The role of HRD becomes critical and emphasizes the significance of human capital's well-being during a crisis. Hence, in promoting their health, value, and organizational need to take care of their most valued assets, human capital. For example, Kopp et al. (2011) offered storytelling that can help HRD practitioners to reduce employees' stress during the crisis. Another HRD role is to be a link between employees and leaders. They need to voice employees' concerns about work, suggest solutions to leaders, and make sure leaders listen to and provide psychological empowerment and supervisory support for their employees at the time of crisis. They also need to keep employees updated and informed of the current state of the business is essential.

Supervisory support

Adopting appropriate strategies to handle a crisis situation, will help organizations prepare for and respond to COVID-19 situations and minimize its adverse impact on stakeholders. According to Mani and Mishra (2020), during uncertain times, morale is low, and jobs get threatened as the economy suffers. Leaders can support supervisors by boosting motivation and frequenting engagement with employees. During the pandemic, employees are facing challenges with the new work environment. This is essential for business leaders and supervisors to become more flexible as employees are, also, unprepared and need to adjust to the new situation. Eisenberger et al. (2002) study affirmed that supervisory support can help leaders to increase employee retention; this advantage can positively impact the organization performance during and after the crisis.

Crisis communication as an integral part of the crisis management, refers to candid and frequent communications with employees about the current state of the business. Hearing regularly from team leaders, taking perspective, and ensuring the well-being of those impacted by the pandemic, is one of the core responsibilities of the leaders at the time of a pandemic and business lock down. By sharpening their emotional quotient,

leaders would have a more empathetic response to the needs of their employees (Wooten and James 2008).

Positive reinforcement and appreciation of work

During COVID-19, positive reinforcement and appreciation of work is highly important. McGuinness (2020) interacted with business leaders across various industries and learned about four needed skills. First, leaders need to have positive accountability, and recognize that an employee's way of dealing with their stress, job, and personal situations are an important part of managing during a crisis. Second, McGuinness (2020) suggested that leaders need foresight, the ability to dissect misinformation, discipline and objectivity, and need to have environmental and situational awareness. Foresight helps leaders anticipate barriers that might engulf the business. Third, McGuinness (2020) suggested that leaders need to put people first. During a crisis, leaders must validate gratitude for the employee's adversities. This helps build loyalty and promotes commitment on behalf of the organization. And fourth, McGuinness (2020) suggested that leaders need to have decisive adaptability. What sets leaders apart are the way they handle challenging situations, especially during a pandemic. Thus, leaders must withhold feelings, process information swiftly, prioritize needs, and not react impulsively. Decision making should be made with certainty, action, and positive reinforcement.

When considering employees' needs during COVID-19, organizations are analysing the well-being holistically. Mental, emotional, and physical safety are being examined and organizations are implementing resources for employees. Brower (2020) stated that wellness centres are being set up and meditation sessions are being offered in the workplace. Organizations are engaging more with employees and learning what motivates them. Brower (2020) forecasts that mental health and leadership will grow during crisis, company culture will become more of a focus, working-from-home will be the new norm, greater work-life balance disparities, more frequent team engagement, vast flexibility, and significant use in technology. Companies will increase their speed and reduce bureaucracy, standardize practice, and reduce unnecessary systems resulting in increasing employee empowerment (Brower 2020). Moreover, from an organizational standpoint, Brower (2020) suggested that a result of COVID-19 will be that organizations will begin to collaborate more instead of competing against each other.

Communication

During COVID-19, many organizations are experiencing communication challenges due to the changing environments. Orangefiery (2020a) conducted a survey to get employees' perspectives on the need for communication and found they needed more of: (1) transparency about what they know and what they do not know, (2) information about resources for emotional and mental health in dealing with stress and anxiety, and (3) a stronger acknowledgement of the difficulty of the situation. On the other hand, Orangefiery (2020b) suggested some actionable steps that leaders can take to improve communications during COVID-19 include showing empathy for subordinates; genuinely caring and prioritizing care about employees; and always being visible and leading by example.

Similarly, Bogusky-Halper (2020) conducted a survey about leaders' communication during COVID-19. The top six responses, declared during the current pandemic,

included: leaders need to communicate with honesty and transparency; staying calm and leading by example; helping employees stay safe and healthy; being factual; checking in and caring; and being clear and direct.

The psychological empowerment, positive reinforcement and appreciation for work, and communication are essential for leaders during times of crisis, especially since employee's needs are an important aspect to focus on in response to COVID-19. Therefore, HRD professionals should play a major role to address employees' needs (Gilbreath and Montesino 2006). Gilbreath and Montesino (2006) mentioned that HRD professionals need to identify the work environment stressors and offer suggestions to improve employee well-being. Because when a crisis happens, employees will depend on organizations for guidance and organizations will depend on employees to push forward and rise to the challenge.

How can leaders rise to the challenge?

There are a variety of examples where leaders or organizations have risen to the challenge in trying times. In this section we will discuss some applicable competencies and highlight a few examples where these competencies were involved. A few similarities exist across crises such as ambiguity, anxiety, and tension to name a few, and the recent COVID-19 situation is no different. Fortunately, we can look to previous crises for guidance and perspective to handle the current case.

Nancy Koehn, from the Harvard Business Review, provided a recent look regarding this situation and highlighted four distinct competencies that provide value in times of crisis: acknowledging fear, providing roles and purpose, focusing on learning, and focusing on the energy and emotion of those involved (Koehn 2020). Additionally, Schwantes (2020) provided four more competencies that centred on employees in times of crises. These actions included providing flexibility, accounting for emotions, staying engaged, and listening to their opinions (Schwantes 2020). The following examples include both organizational and political contexts; however, we approached them as having no difference in leadership competencies. This was primarily due to each context sharing a similar set of interpersonal dynamics.

Leadership competency examples

To highlight the competency of providing roles and purpose we can look no further than the automobile manufacturing industry. With most nations under strict quarantine guidelines there is little demand for new vehicles. Yet many, such as Ford, General Motors Toyota, and Tesla have repurposed their production facilities to provide ventilators instead of automobiles (Wattles and Valdes-Dapena 2020). Regarding the effectiveness of this competency, Kerns and Ko (as cited in Kerns 2017) found that employees under these purpose driven circumstances were likely to have both increased performance and health. Individually, Governor Andrew Cuomo of New York has applied competencies in a daily update press conference of both acknowledging fear and focusing on the energy of those involved. Seeger (2006) noted, 'If the public believes that a crisis is severe, it is also important to acknowledge this belief and respond accordingly' (239). The moment involved a video conference with his mother and other family members on Mother's Day. Towards the end of the discussion he said, 'This is going to be over and

we'll going to get back to life as normal and we're going to have fun' (listed in CBS News website, as of May 2020). In doing so he acknowledged the fear of the moment and his inability to physically be with his mother, and he also gave hope of a resolution. Additionally, by taking time out of a formal press conference briefing he modelled a behaviour focused on restorative health and prioritizing his own energy, which is critical during a crisis (Forster, Patlas, and Lexa 2020). This was not a selfish action, but rather one that can be inspirational to others. It is important to note that even in a global pandemic we must take care of ourselves, our sources of energy, and those around us.

Another example comes from New Zealand. Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern, in two previous crisis situations for her country, has exemplified how the nature of communication during a crisis is paramount. First, her response to the Christchurch mass shooting event in 2019 and now COVID-19. Her leadership style has been characterized as one of 'strength and sanity' (Luscombe 2020). Given the times, that style seems quite appropriate and she even does it with a healthy dose of empathy, which is noted as another crisis communication best practice (Veil 2020). The element of sanity comes through in her communication style. It is her ability to communicate purpose to the people of her country in a clear and frequent manner. This can be seen by citizens of New Zealand, such as Christine Nam who said, 'Most New Zealanders can verbalize the government's response to Covid-19, while the same can't be said for other countries because the response has been muddled and indecisive' (Taylor 2020, 2). This level of clarity and frequent communication provides comfort in otherwise uncomfortable times, as the leader provides information instead of leaving a vacuum for others to fill with potential misinformation (Veil 2020).

HRD roles to support their leaders in times of crisis

Research on crisis leadership emphasizes, 'crisis leadership demands an integration of skills, abilities, and traits that allow a leader to plan for, respond to, and learn from crisis events while under public scrutiny' (Wooten and James 2008, 2). HRD professionals have the responsibility to support leaders by preparing them to deal with current and future crises (Wooten and James 2008). HRD practitioners have to support organizational leaders to spread a positive brand image of the organization by inspiring compassion, creativity, and kindness. Through a strategic and proactive approach, HRD can help build individual and organizational resilience during a crisis. Here are five roles leaders can play and how HRD can support their endeavours in times of crisis.

Role 1 – sensemaker

Employees look up to their leaders for guidance in their day to day activities, and more so when in times of challenge and crisis. Employees expect their leaders to be there to make sense of things for them. Pye (2005) suggested that one way to conceptualize what leaders do, is to limit the range of responses to any action other than from the definition that is currently prevalent. Furthermore, Colville and Murphy (2006) stated that all leaders are tested by events that happen, and it depends on what sense they make of the situation and what others make of this and trying to work out what they do as a consequence. Leaders should be able to act fast with changing situations, and put reflection-in-action method

into practice (Eraut 2006). Furthermore, Eraut (2006) goes on to mention that during the use of reflection-in-action, the leader needs to think critically while engaging in the situation to discover new processes, restructure strategies of action and understand the phenomena. In this case, sensemaking is important, because it is more inclusive and draws in other crucial elements of everyday life in organizations (Pye 2005). A leader must be in a position to provide guidance and support to their employees. This would be a great opportunity for HRD professionals to provide the necessary guidance that the leaders would need to support their employees.

Post COVID

The effective crisis response demands a leader to make quick decisions, as a leader is considered a person who has considerable social influence on the people around them. HRD can assist leaders with the necessary guidance they need as they try to make sense of this new situation. HRD professionals must tap their network of HRD professionals and colleagues and understand how other organizations are responding to COVID-related issues. This knowledge needs to be bundled and presented to the leaders by breaking down the information in a way that can help leaders make most sense. In addition, data from employees directly from the field will help leaders assess the situation more clearly.

There are some existing examples of how HRD professionals are rising to the challenge and helping leaders make sense of employee's challenges. Caminiti (2020) reports Diane Gherson's efforts as a chief HR Officer at IBM to enforce work-from-home policies early on. Gherson held two meetings weekly with employees to understand their issues and challenges, which she then used to support the policies she presented to leaders.

Role 2 – technology enabler

Leadership includes the development and a vision for integrating technology within the organization (Lewis 2010) and technology is used by workers to mediate their activities (Orlikowski 1992). As technology has become an important part of the organization and its workers, leaders should be competent to enable the workers in their roles using technology.

Colville and Murphy (2006), suggests a new leadership culture that would enable employees to respond successfully to the ever-changing demand of its global marketplace. As Schreiber and Carley (2006) mentions, leaders have at present to balance leading with efficiency and leading with learning and adaptability. Adaptability is important for the leaders, because the postmodern economy is characterized by uncertainty and turbulence, and most importantly this new dynamic context is driven by technological revolution and economic globalization (Schreiber and Carley 2006).

Post COVID

There are many ways that technology can aid in easing the stress of the managers and workers by making the process more flexible. Technology has helped in making it possible for working from alternate locations. 'Suddenly, HRD, e-learning, distance learning, self-learning, and online learning have turned out to be fashionable, relevant, and such important dimensions in all industries across the globe' (Li, Ghosh, and Nachmias 2020, 2). New trends invite innovation in technology, which will further

present organizations a multitude of opportunities. It will become paramount for HRD professionals to support their leaders to explore and establish most relevant, cost-effective, and wide-range technological innovations to support employee's learning and networking needs.

With increase in overall technology needs, leaders in the role of chief information officer (CIO) are fundamental to the organization. Suer (2020) interviewed 14 CIO's from various industries to understand how they were responding to the technology needs of their employees. Ryan Fay, the global head of technology at Gartner responded by stating that his organization has accelerated the organization's digital strategy to meet both employee's and customer's needs (Suer 2020).

Role 3 – emotional stability and employee well-being

Leaders will be looked up to in the future and post-pandemic to help employees overcome several emotional and personal problems. Leaders will need to understand each and every individual's problems separately and guide them to overcome them. Rocco and Shuck (2019) presented their views on how leaders and organizations must create a space for employees so they can grieve and express grief. HRD can assist leaders to develop their emotional quotient and emotional intelligence which has been stated as an important leadership trait (Farnia and Nafukho 2016).

Bar-On's (1997) emotional-social intelligence model provides some guidance on leadership development focusing on the leader's overall intrapersonal skills, interpersonal skills, adaptability, stress management, and general mood. We would propose to add a sixth dimension to this model: social awareness, which we borrow from Goleman's EI competency model (1998). Leaders must break down distance with employees at home by reaching out to them virtually on a continuous basis. HRD can help develop an agenda for leaders, which ensures that communication between employees and leaders is focusing on employee's well-being in their direct social context.

Post COVID

Organizations and leaders must anticipate social changes that permeate all aspects of the individual's context. It may be challenging for employees to separate their work from challenges at home. HRD must promote remote engagement by mediating communication between leaders and employees and help them set realistic goals and celebrate employee achievements. HRD can help leaders to set up virtual platforms for employees, where they can share both their challenges and wins.

Role 4 – innovative communication

Most organizations are doing a good job of communicating challenges and relief related to COVID-19. Official websites have written statements about how they are reacting to COVID-19 not only for the employee's sake but for customer's safety. Many organizations have changed their business models and products to adapt to changing customer needs.

Higher leadership, such as CEO and CFOs make or approve important strategic decisions during a crisis that can help the organization's well-being. Line managers and direct supervisors are then responsible to share those decisions with the employees (Ravazzani 2015).

After the 2011 floods in Thailand, the country experienced long-lasting impacts on the economy and the local people blamed the government and organizational leaders for not engaging in productive communication. Pathak (2005), suggests that organizations must engage with all types of medium to communicate with people: television, media, smart-phones, social media, and open-source data. However, this has caused a surge in communication, which may make some employees feel overwhelmed. In addition, media outlets such as news channels, newspapers, and social media are running different narratives about safety during COVID-19, which is further spreading not only misinformation but confusion among the viewers.

At this time, organizational leaders have the responsibility to help employees receive the correct and most updated information. In addition, leaders will need to adopt innovative ways to feed information in moderation to employees to reduce anxiety and fear.

Some leaders are expecting their employees to provide them with an hour-by-hour breakdown of work done and goals achieved. With most employees working from home, the line between managing and micromanaging seems to be blurring. On a global level, all employees are experiencing COVID-19 differently, which has caused them to react to it differently.

Some leaders are engaging with their employees on a weekly or daily basis on a one-on-one basis, which helps employees receive positive reinforcement of their work. HRD can help leaders to develop innovative communication techniques. Ravazzani (2015) highlights that employee's diversity in the organizations must be adhered to when framing a communication message during the crisis as it affects employee's sensemaking of the situation.

Role 5 – maintain financial health of the organization

Leaders need to play an essential role during crises not only for their employees but for the organization too. Maintaining fiscal capacities and financial health can enable leaders to deliver a strong message to the employees. Saving money and not losing out on finances can help save jobs and avoid lay-offs and furloughs.

Financial stress leads employees to be stressed, which ultimately affects productivity. Mitsakis (2019) claims that HRD is the success element, which aids the organization's resilience during a crisis. For example, during the 2008 Financial crisis, HRD was instrumental in formulating cost reduction strategies that helped leaders keep the organizations afloat (Mitsakis 2019). Mitsakis (2019) also presents a model that can enable HRD to interact with micro and macro organizational factors to develop individual and organizational competencies through agility, flexibility, and adaptability.

Leaders are also in charge of the financial aspects of the company and they can be susceptible to psychological forces in times of crisis that would distract them from their roles as risk managers (Schwantes 2020). Through innovative communication, HRD professionals can ensure that employees are aware of the organization's financial standing. It may have a positive impact on employees when they are kept informed on why access to some essential resources is restricted. Employees may demonstrate their support to a leader's decisions on cost-cuttings when HRD professionals present them with viable alternatives that do not affect employee well-being. Table 2 provides a comparison of leader roles and practices in normal times vs. in times of crisis.

Table 2. Leadership best-practices in normal times vs. times of crisis.

Leadership Practices in Normal Times	Leadership Roles in Times of Crisis
Model the Way	Sensemaker
Inspire a Shared Vision	Technology Enabler
Challenge the Process	Emotional Stability and Employee Well-being
Enable Others to Act	Innovative Communication
Encourage the Heart	Maintain Financial Health of the Organization

Implications

The current COVID-19 crisis is having, and will continue to have, a huge impact on us at the individual, institutional, societal, and global levels. At the institutional level, the pandemic brings into the spotlight the role of leaders and leadership in reshaping their organizations to survive during and after the crisis. Furthermore, some of us might argue that times of crisis, in general, represent an opportunity for goal-driven, strategic leaders to turn challenges into wins and eventually give their organizations competitive advantage.

Kohlls (2020) reported that ‘how you treat your employees will be remembered for years to come’ (15). Among the many leadership lessons that emerge for us in light of the current crisis, communication makes it to the top of the list. It is imperative for leaders to keep constant communication with all stakeholders to ease their stress and address their concerns. The pandemic is affecting both personal and work lives, and people need organizations to keep them informed about safety measures, how the crisis is affecting their jobs, and other things that matter to them. Leaders should be cognizant of the impact that their communication leaves on stakeholders. Therefore, it is critical for the communicated messages to be aligned, realistic, positive, balanced, and sent out via appropriate channels. Moreover, leaders must particularly explain to their stakeholders the crisis resolution strategy and their vision for facing current and future challenges. By being able deliver a concise message that captures the complexity of the crisis and lays out the way ahead, leaders can earn the trust of all stakeholders in the organization and in those leading it.

Another important lesson that emerges in this discussion is distributing leadership. Facing and addressing the challenges of a complex crisis like the current pandemic requires more than leaders acting alone. Relying on traditional notions of leadership – like charismatic, top-down, or authoritative approaches – is not sufficient to successfully navigate the challenges of such complex crises and unpredictable environments. Therefore, leaders should tap onto the collective leadership potential of everyone in the organization. The top leadership’s role would have to be decisive and swift in setting organizational priorities, but should utilize team delegation to come up with efficient roadmaps to achieving goals and responding to the crisis. The sense of ownership that would result from distributing and sharing the leadership responsibility is invaluable. Distributing leadership creates motivated teams, improves decision making, and boosts the stakeholders’ commitment to the organization and its survival (Kezar and Holcombe 2017).

A final leadership lesson that surfaces from our discussion is promoting organizational resilience. Resilience is about developing the ability to move the organization post crisis to a new position that is better than its state before the crisis. It means to lead through the crisis with enough agility to absorb adversity and improve responsiveness to arising challenges. It also means to be creative and innovative in how to come out of the crisis

equipped with novel ways of handling difficulties. Resilience acknowledges that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to facing organizational challenges. Moreover, it is built on the assumption that not all crises are the same, and different situations require different sets of responses. Therefore, leaders should make sure to incorporate an agile and adaptive mindset into their decision making and operational thinking. Organizations that want to survive crisis situations must develop the necessary infrastructure that gives space to healthy communication, interactive decision making, and strategic planning in a flexible atmosphere that is agile and open to growth (Raney 2014). By embedding flexibility in their culture, organizations can better understand the core issues of employees and, eventually, respond efficiently to arising challenges by taking appropriate strategic decisions (Caminiti 2020).

Conclusion

While the majority of studies in HRD and leadership look at stable working environments, the current pandemic and past crisis events show that decision making processes occur in unpredictable and unclear contexts. In this regard, we suggest HRD practitioners and scholars need to examine critical interventions that can be applied during unstable times and to identify the possible outcomes regarding the success and failure of applied interventions.

In this article we examined the effects of an event, such as the pandemic, on employees and how their needs may accelerate. Through industrial and political leadership examples, we explore how strong leaders evolved through the pandemic. Leadership must respond to these changes by adjusting their competencies by quickly making sense of the situation and responding to it by relying on their instinct and HRD professionals. During this pandemic, organizations will flourish under a leader who a) provides strong roles and purpose; b) shares leadership; c) communicates; d) ensures employee's access to technology; e) prioritizes employee's emotional stability; f) maintains organizational financial health; and g) promotes organizational resilience.

Last, we make recommendations on the strategic role HRD can play to assist and develop leaders during this pandemic by, a) providing strong and reliable ground data; b) expanding their professional network; c) promoting innovation; d) ensuring employee's continued learning; e) facilitate regular meetings; and f) create a platform to celebrate employees. Leaders need to rely on HRD now more than before, which can further the agenda of HRD to secure a seat on the strategic table.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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