

Organizational leadership during the early stage of pandemic

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Abstract: Under the incidence of COVID-19 pandemic, everything is changed from behavior to action patterns. Research indicates that lack of flexibility and finding short term solutions to changes can be a myopia of leadership. People, organizations and governments are leading their actions in a context characterized by the unknown, the lack of predictability and hazy horizons, in which the only weapon is the ability to adapt. Adaptive leadership should be a solution for individuals and organizations to adjust to changing environments and effectively respond to recurring problems. The adaptive leadership involves changing behavior in appropriate ways as the situation changes and it requires knowledge and the tools to solve the problem efficiently.

The article is an exploratory study based on author's observations and literature investigation on the subject investigated during COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, the paper aims to investigate how companies acted in the first phase of the pandemic (as first actions), but also how organizational leadership can be transformed into current conditions to achieve efficiency. The article provide a perspective of the adaptive leadership theory as a basis for business to change their traditional leadership into a process that is not constrained by hierarchical and one-directional notions of leadership (Scott Du Rue, 2011) because in current context, leadership should develop and adapt in dynamic contexts.

Limitations: the paper is a theoretical approach that is trying to guide the organizations in the process of acting in a business, economic and social environment profoundly changed by the pandemic effects. Another limitation is the period investigated; the author includes only the actions in the early stage of pandemic (the first three months).

Key words: pandemic, leadership, organization, crisis, development, adaptative leadership
JEL: H12, M12, M54

1. Introduction

A crisis is an unexpected event or sequence of events of enormous scale and overwhelming speed, resulting in a high degree of uncertainty that gives rise to disorientation, a feeling of lost control, and strong emotional disturbance (Howitt and Leonard, 2007).

There are many studies about crisis, most of them investigate crisis typology and action plans for managing crisis caused by errors or management mistakes in the organization, or by accidents, terrorist acts or natural disasters.

The present paper tries to investigate the organizational leadership during a crisis caused by a pandemic. According to the World Health Organization (2010) "A pandemic is the worldwide spread of a new disease." Therefore, its effects exist throughout the world, in which everything is changing from normal to extraordinary around the entire world. A pandemic affects the health of the population, the economy with implications on public budgets, companies and the whole society which further complicates the ability to easily manage the crisis. In the case of a "common" crisis, such as those mentioned above, they often do not affect such a vast number of people and geographic areas.

In a pandemic crisis, no matter how prepared the leaders are at the governmental or organizational level by creating well-designed plans for managing it, they cannot encompass the full range of effects caused by the pandemic. Therefore, even if organizations or representatives of public institutions would have different scenarios prepared to deal with a crisis, it certainly could not have predicted the magnitude of the transformations caused by a pandemic, such as that caused by COVID - 19. A key factor in

fighting the virus effects could be the leader's "behaviors and mindsets that will prevent them from overreacting to yesterday's developments and help them look ahead" (D'Auria and De Smet, 2020).

A good a leadership can turn uncertainty and obstacles into solutions and to communicate to efficiently all the strategies and actions. Reynolds and Crouse (2008) mention that "an open and empathetic style of communication that engenders the public's trust is the most effective when officials are attempting to galvanize the population to take a positive action or refrain from a harmful act." Therefore, an organizational leader must show trust and credibility, competence and expertise, honesty and openness, and dedication and commitment.

2. Literature review

During the early of the twentieth century, leadership has increasingly become a major subject not only in the management literature and business practice but also in other domains such as sociology and psychology (Toma et al., 2016). While the importance of leadership is generally accepted all over the world, there are as many definitions of it as there are so many organizations (Toma and Marinescu, 2013). The changes in business and technology that have been taking place in recent decades, accelerated even more by the effects of the pandemic, make impossible for inflexible organizations to exist. For that reason, many researchers draw the attentions about the necessity of organizational leadership chances. According to the Johnson-Kanda and Yawson (2018) "The trend toward unpredictable events in a globalized environment requires organizational

structures and cultures that are less controlling and determining but instead generating flexibility and creativity to respond to chaotic events." Peter Drucker has highlighted the need for change since the '90s when he stated that complexity theory aims to address the change in leadership to managing an organization as a social enterprise and a way to address the volatility of today's markets (Drucker, 1998). Because of its complexity and transformations, there many leadership theories developed in the last decades. For example, the researcher Levine (2000) after investigating the existing theories, he divided four groups of leadership theories. The groups are:

- The Early Theorists - in this group the leadership has been found as a product of a set of forces. Levine included in this section, the Great Man theories, Trait theories, and Environmental theories.

- The Interactive Theorists - in this group are included Personal-Situational theories, and Interaction-Expectation Theories. The new leadership theories were introduced to examine interactive relationships during leadership studies, in opposed to observing leadership traits as parted characteristics of individual.

- The Organizational Theorists – are included the Humanistic theories, and Task-Relationship theories. They are based on the investigation of the relationship between leaders and organization.

- The Modern Theorists – includes theories that outline leadership behavior in terms of the ways in which it influences follower's behavior. At this stage, leading an organization depends on many factors such as the organizational culture, the behavior of the followers, and the personal traits of the

leader. For that reason, leadership should encompass all levels of organizational hierarchy, each level having a corresponding role in the overall strategy of the organization (Josan, 2013). Recurring patterns of leading and following interactions produce emergent leader-follower identities, relationships and social structures, which enables groups to evolve dynamically as Scott De Rue (2011) pointed out the main advantages.

Moreover, Owens and Valesky (2007) highlighted that there is a growing body of literature which addresses the need to find new and better ways to lead under these unstable and unpredictable conditions. In offering a solution to this necessity, Heifetz and Linsky (2004) proffered that an adaptive leadership style would be more efficient (Nelson and Squires, 2017). The adaptive leadership is described by Cojocar (2009) as a contemporary leadership concept, evolving from situational, transformational, and complexity theories, as described by Nastanski (2002), being further refined by leadership theorists such as Heifetz (1994), Yukl (2002), and Bennis (2003), who are pioneering adaptive leadership approaches into the practicality of today's modern day workplace.

There are also authors which argued that Heifetz theory has been limited adoption of the model across different types of large organizations (Northouse, 2016) and there is not enough empirical research on the adaptive leadership model (Dugan, 2017). Even if it is a theory that has been criticized for its, in the pandemic context, this remains an option that can be applied in dynamic environments because the model is more flexible than the traditional leadership.

Therefore, Cojocar (2009) the adaptive leadership is widely accepted by some as a

derivative of other leadership theories such as situational, transformational and complexity leadership theories that is a necessary trait or competency for today's leaders.

Today, more than ever, humanity needs to adapt and find effective solutions. The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic are enormous on health, economies, and even national security in the world. Even if the concept has a long history, the term of "pandemic" is still not been defined by many medical texts. According to the authors Qiu, Rutherford, Mao and Chu (2017), the pandemic are some key features that help us to understand the concept better. This key features include: wide geographic extension, disease movement, novelty, severity, high attack rates and explosiveness, minimal population immunity, infectiousness and contagiousness. Even in the absence of a vast literature on the pandemic definitions, to understand the concept, we could use the definition provided by the Dictionary of Epidemiology which describes it as: "an epidemic occurring worldwide, or over a very wide area, crossing international boundaries and usually affecting a large number of people" (Qiu et al, 2017). Thus, in the paper we will refer to the above definition when we use the term pandemic.

3. Research methodology

The article is an exploratory study based on author's observations and literature investigation which has two objectives: 1. To focus on Covid-19 companies immediate actions; and 2. To offer a new perspective of leadership in a dynamic context characterized by the lack of predictability and hazy horizons.

The analysis of the company's immediate actions includes the early stage of pandemic (March – May 2020) considering the deadline for publishing the article. Therefore, the research will be developed in further articles that will include the evolution of the pandemic and the actions taken by companies after the unforeseen period.

4. Results and discussions

The results are structured in two sections. First, the author highlights the organizational action measures during the early stage of pandemic. Secondly, the paper presents the adaptive leadership process and highlights four foundational principles of effective adaptive leadership.

4.1. Organizational action measures during the early stage of pandemic

In the light of the first months during pandemic, the reactions, as a result of the evolution of the virus and its effects, indicated the existence of some organizational actions that I will present in the lines below. It should be noted that the research is incipient, which is limited to the early stages of the pandemic.

1) Business immediate actions

Immediate actions represent the ability to prevent and respond to changes in the internal and external environment. The immediate actions depend on how the leaders prepared the plans to prevent and manage unpredictable, even critical, situations. The immediate reaction in times of pandemic is crucial for the organization and must come in response to employees, customers, suppliers, investors, community, competition. Every entity requires a type of actions as:

- employees - occupational safety

measures, ensuring well-being, adapting to new needs (fear, uncertainty, vulnerability to managing personal problems - suspension of school for employees with children), protection of employees with chronic diseases, etc.,

- customers - creating an environment to protect them, increasing the feeling of certainty about products / services in a period of uncertainty through corporate social responsibility campaigns,

- suppliers - ensuring the feeling that will respect their obligations to them and total openness to communication with them to find common solutions,

- community - initiating messages and developing social responsibility programs to increase the humanity of the company and brand by providing information support, but also emotional to their needs and fears,

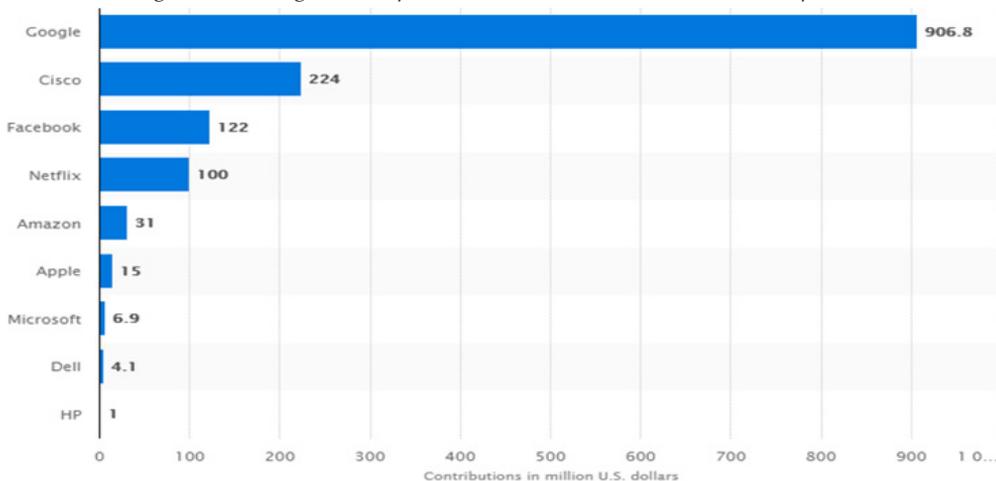
- investors – by giving a sense of security of decision-making, minimizing the impact of the pandemic on - if possible, if the field of activity allows the continuation of the activity, if not, the development of strategies, analyzes, return plans as realistic and well documented as possible,

- competition - it's time to position itself even better in the market through these reactions that they must be immediate and well calculated. A company can't leave the door open to competition, but it can't attack in a sensitive situation for any business. The difference between your company and competition will consist in involvement, the quality of the messages sent to the audiences, the visibility and the reduced reaction time.

2) Business charity

In difficult times, it is necessary for the companies, to show humanity/charity towards the industry. It must consist in collaboration, involvement, and actions that are increasing the feeling of business community so that, together, they will find a common and an effective response measures for customers. Thus, during the lockdown period, many companies have shown their side of charity through donations to help governments and citizens. According to Tankovska (2020), only the financial contribution of leading technology companies to the COVID-19 response in 2020 was over one billion euros. The largest donations can be seen in the chart below:

Figure 1. Leading tech companies' donations towards COVID-19 response



Source: Tankovska, 2020

Many of the donations consisted on actions or goods to support businesses, organizations and healthcare workers to combat the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). For example, Apple donated millions of masks to the healthcare workers and Tesla's CEO Elon Musk's gave 1,200 ventilators.

Also, many companies expanded their activity to produce to produce masks and personal protective equipment for medical professionals. Brands as Phoebe English, Holly Fulton and Bethany Williams have joined forces to coordinate production starting in mid-March. More than that, the Italian fashion brands as Prada, Gucci and Giorgio Armani have donated millions of euros to support the creation of respirators and hospital wings. Dior and Givenchy converted their fragrance factories to make hand sanitizers. In addition to these charitable actions, companies have also invested in social responsibility campaigns. Whether we are talking about giant companies or small companies, they ran campaigns to help and direct people's behavior in preventing COVID infection or to urge them to take responsibility and trust. Being a lockdown period, the campaigns took place on the Internet (company websites and social media) and through television and radio. Particularly, the campaigns goals consist in awareness education and support for immediate help and assistance to the fight against the virus. All the actions carried out by oneself or through partnerships showed the face of the charity of the business at a time that humanity needed. Without these actions, many of the companies would have lost the fight for long-term competitiveness. Its success or failure depends on the ability to respond and adapt to

uncertain conditions. Even if there is not always all the data to ensure the safest decision measures, crisis specialists and leaders must show openness / transparency, charity, confidence that they know what they do or will do honestly when they make mistakes.

3) Adapting leadership style

Even if the context generated by coronavirus indicates a situation that humanity has not encountered in the last 100 years, especially from a business perspective. However, it should be noted that the challenges are not all new to leadership. In the spirit of this remark, author Michael Fraser drew attention to the challenges that leaders had before. These include communicating in a crisis; making decisions with incomplete information available; effectively leading up, down, and across (M. Fraser, 2020). But, equally, they can be leaders whose leadership style can be myopic because is characterized by various macro uncertainties, risks and challenges that can affect any near-term economic opportunity. Thus, some leaders may indicate a myopia management. Myopia is a narrow view of something, a lack of foresight. In this situation, the leaders adopt a limited action, turning their attention to the problem or problems directly related to the health crisis (ensuring protection measures, moving the activity of online employees, etc.), but these are short-term solutions. This type of visible leadership often creates a false sense of security, as it creates a short-term solution that addresses an immediate concern, without considering the long-term consequences and challenges. For example, in the case of moving employees from work to home, the commitment of leaders should also address the intangible needs of employees, often of an emotional nature, to prevent

their exhaustion, even depression and anxiety. To ensure that the transition from office to homework is not a simple move from a physical point of view, but also an accommodation with a new style of work that involves empathy, individual approach, the leaders must ensure material and moral benefits that can ease this transition, as well as transparency and long-term vision so that employees feel confident and motivated. In crisis, the leadership is needed to adapt and to find new ways to serve their customers and communities. And for that reason, they should to adapt more the adaptive leadership style than traditional one.

4.2. Adaptive leadership

The adaptive leadership involves changing behavior in appropriate ways as the situation changes and it requires knowledge and the tools to solve the problem in the act of working on it. A variety of terms have been used to describe leaders who are able to accurately diagnose the situation and vary their behavior accordingly. Examples of these terms include flexible, adaptable, agile, and versatile (e.g., Kaiser, Lindberg, & Craig, 2007; Pulakos, Arad, Donovan, & Plamondon, 2000).

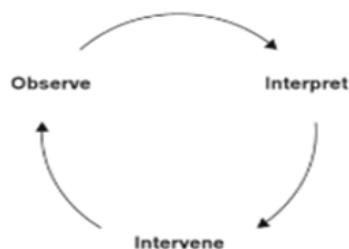
Therefore, in order to achieve present and future performance, a more complex approach is needed, through which leaders must not position themselves as being in a myopic context, but in an adaptive one, which involves the use of a leadership style as effective as possible. In the literature, the adaptive context is defined as "a situation that demands a response outside your current toolkit or repertoire; it consists of a gap between aspirations and operational capacity that cannot be closed by the expertise and

procedures currently in place." (R. Heifetz, 2009). Therefore, "an adaptive challenge is one for which the necessary knowledge to solve the problem does not yet exist. It requires creating the knowledge and the tools to solve the problem in the act of working on it." (Wagner, A. Kegan, R., Lahey, L., Lemons, R.W., Garnier, J., Helsing, D. Howell, A., & Rasmussen, H.T. (2006).

Adaptive leadership includes a series of skills and abilities which helps individuals and organizations to adapt to changing environments and effectively respond to recurring problems.

The authors Ronald Heifetz, Alexander Grashow and Marty Linsky (2009) had included three key activities for the adaptive leadership process: "observing events and patterns, interpreting what you are observing (developing multiple hypothesis about really is going on) and designing interventions based on the observations to address the adaptive challenge" that it was identified.

Figure 2. The adaptive leadership process



Source: Ronald Heifetz, Alexander Grashow and Marty Linsky (2009)

The process is repetitive, and each of these activities is based of the one that came before it. Thus, observing include a collection of data that is out there to see, find and

discover. This can be a critical first step because it is hard to remain objectively in a middle of action in an organization and especially in a context dominated by changes and uncertainty as pandemic is.

Interpretation is the activity of analyzing data obtained in the above step and it consists in the ability to view the same set of data from several different perspectives. This multidirectional analysis is more accurate and provide a larger picture of the facts that will be the base for the future decision.

The intervention should reflect the hypothesis about the problem and its related with the organizational resources. Heifetz, Grashow and Linsky (2009) mentioned that a well- designated intervention provide context in terms of connecting the interpretations with the purpose or task on the table so people can see that the perspective is relevant to their collective efforts.

More than that, Ramalingam and Ferrari (2020) pointed that the adaptive style helps leaders to identify which interventions – or combinations of interventions – might work best and why, as well as understanding the impacts of these interventions. To implement the adaptive style, the authors highlighted the need for a set of four urgent priorities such as:

- Building leadership vision and a supportive management culture across teams and units coordinating the response. This action involves transparency and involvement because everyone needs to understand and accept the key thresholds that trigger change, and a range of perspectives and inputs needs to be sought;

- Approaching the system perspective as a whole - is needed to understand how best to calibrate interventions (cited Ramalingam, 2013). A system perspective also means paying attention to wider effects and anticipate the unintended consequences

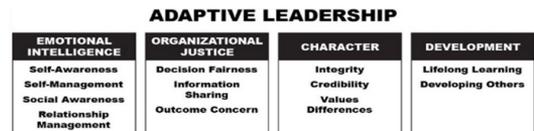
and continually assessing how to respond to them.

- Sustaining the locally led innovation and problem-solving because these initiatives helps to catalyze behavioral changes and, the diversity of local adaptations presents a powerful opportunity for assessing value and viability, learning and, where feasible, disseminating and scaling. Also, a strong facilitative leadership helps to encourage transparency about the efforts and to take on board learning from both successful and failed efforts is critical to maximizing the benefits.

- Building a vision of desired future outcomes. This will help to think beyond the shadow of the pandemic to the kind of world we want to forge together. For that reason, a systemic and adaptive leadership will support a more agile and adaptive decision making at both operational and leadership levels.

To implement an adaptive leadership style, leaders must possess or develop a set of skills and values needed to cope with changes in the internal and external environment. According to T. Bradberry (2012), the adaptive leadership is a unique combination of skills, perspective, and guided effort that enable true excellence. The author highlighted four foundational principles of effective adaptive leadership (see figure 3):

Figure 3. Adaptive leadership



Source: Travis Bradberry, 2012

- Emotional intelligence represents a set of skills that capture the leader awareness of his/her own emotions and the emotions of others and how he/she uses this awareness

to manage effectively and form quality relationship

- Organizational justice – helps leaders to integrate what people think, what they want to hear, and how they want to hear it with the facts. This makes people feel respected and valued.

- Character – helps leaders to earn people's respect by walking their talk because they demonstrate ethical responsibility and morality. They are transparent in their communication style and hold themselves to the same standards to which they hold their team.

- Development – motivates the leaders to learn and to develop their skills and knowledge to achieve their true potential and to develop the organization and others. Adaptive leaders empower their colleagues and employees to learn and grow through the process of organizational change.

In conclusion, an adaptive leader can take people outside their comfort zones and assess and address the toughest challenges based on emotional intelligence, transparency, integrity, involvement of employees in the development of the idea. This gives employees a sense of ownership and the knowledge that they are being recognized and valued for their contribution. More than that, an adaptive leadership can create a favorable environment for retaining current talented people by increasing the feeling of well-being, belonging to a strong brand, but also responsible. Returning business to the so-called normal state requires an effort to manage the new realities that require well-trained, healthy and dedicated employees. Actions that support employees in the context of difficult change give companies a competitive advantage in attracting talent, reducing the potential for staff shortages and creating a strong culture. Also, from a financial point of view, retaining

talent is more profitable than hiring and there is a strong correlation between employee satisfaction and productivity.

5. Conclusions

Leadership and crisis concepts are discussed together in order that implementation of leadership in crisis can be understood. In changing environments such as the pandemic, traditional leadership may not be an efficient solution because an adaptive challenge needs a more flexible style, one for which the necessary knowledge to solve the problem does not yet exist. For that reason, the paper presents the adaptive leadership being a more adequate for leading in uncertainty and extreme situations. To better understand the context, in the first part of the paper, the content focused on the presentation of the main actions taken by leaders in the early stage of pandemic. Secondly, the paper presents the adaptive leadership process and highlights four foundational principles of effective adaptive leadership. Without claiming to be an exhaustive research, the paper tries to highlight some leadership guidelines in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Paper limitations: the article is a theoretical approach that is trying to guide the organizations in the process of acting in a business, economic and social environment profoundly changed by the pandemic effects. Also, the period investigated can be a limitation because the author includes only the actions in the early stage of pandemic (the first three months). Therefore, the research will be developed in further articles that will include the evolution of the pandemic and the actions taken by companies after the unforeseen period.

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