

COMMENTARY

Identifying the best-fit leaders for the pandemic context

Jeff W. Johnson

SHL

Corresponding author. Email: Jeff.johnson@shl.com

Among other topics, Rudolph et al. (2021) recommended studying the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic context on leadership in terms of who emerges as a leader and what makes a leader effective in this context. My own studies of the influence of context on leader effectiveness (e.g., Johnson, 2017, 2018, 2019; SHL, 2018) have already begun to address these research questions with respect to the pandemic context.

Research has demonstrated that the relationships between personality traits and leader performance depend on the work context (e.g., Johnson, 2017; Judge & Zapata, 2015; Tett & Christiansen, 2007). Few leaders are strong in all areas; most have strengths and weaknesses that need to be matched to the context to maximize their potential for success. For example, excelling in an organization that encourages risk taking requires different traits than excelling in an organization that is very risk averse. I identified 27 contextual moderators that influence the traits that matter most for success and created algorithms for predicting performance within each context based on the most predictive traits (SHL, 2018).

Each leader's work environment is defined by a combination of specific work contexts. Several of the contextual variables previously identified as moderators are highly relevant to the pandemic work environment. The following six context variables are likely the most relevant contexts challenging many leaders that may not have been salient before the pandemic:

1. **Lead geographically dispersed teams.** Sudden lockdowns caused many on-site employees to start working remotely, so many leaders found themselves needing to lead team members that are dispersed across multiple locations to function together as a team.
2. **Deliver under high uncertainty and ambiguity.** The unpredictability of the pandemic and organizational reactions to it forced leaders to navigate an environment that was characterized by a high degree of uncertainty and in which roles and work may not be clearly defined.
3. **Ensure safety and security of persons or operations.** Safety awareness has traditionally been important for certain occupations or industries, but the pandemic has forced leaders in most organizations to lead in an environment in which the safety of employees is at risk.
4. **Design and drive new strategies.** The pandemic has forced many businesses to do things differently to survive, such as adapting to new circumstances, converting face-to-face approaches to virtual interactions, or taking advantage of new opportunities. These changing needs increase the importance of leaders being able to conceive of new strategies and align a team or organization to implement them.
5. **Deliver rapidly changing products, services, and processes.** Leading a team to deliver in a situation in which products, services, or processes change rapidly has become very important for many businesses. Many organizations have rushed to design new products or services to meet a new market demand. For example, automobile manufacturers started manufacturing ventilators, alcohol distilleries are making hand sanitizer, and eat-in

restaurants started delivering or providing curbside service. Other organizations moved quickly to introduce new products or services to market that are particularly important at this time (e.g., selection systems for remote workers).

6. **Operate with high resource constraints.** Many leaders are probably finding themselves in a situation in which the resources available are more limited than the work typically requires. Revenue is lower than what was budgeted, workers have been laid off, or the supply chain has been disrupted, forcing leaders to drive results without the resources they usually have.

Every organization is unique and might find some of these contexts less relevant and other contexts more relevant, but these contexts are probably the most common in the pandemic environment. For this combination of contexts, the following personality characteristics (as measured by SHL's Occupational Personality Questionnaire) were found to best predict successful performance:

- Caring, sympathetic, and considerate toward others
- Focuses on getting things finished
- Understands people and why they behave in certain ways
- Capable of persuading others to a point of view
- Involves others in decision making
- Trusts people
- Willing to work around standard procedures to get results when necessary
- Openly expresses feelings and emotions

A composite of these personality traits predicted overall performance (as rated by the leader's manager and direct reports) within a combination of the six pandemic-related challenges with an uncorrected $r = .31$ ($p < .001$).

Rudolph et al. (2021) further suggested that research could focus on the role that individual differences play in leadership emergence during the pandemic crisis (e.g., are men or women more likely to attain leadership positions in crises). Our research has found that women tend to be better suited to handling this kind of pandemic crisis. Women had significantly higher mean scores on five of the six pandemic-related contexts and on six of the eight personality traits that predict performance within these contexts.

Rudolph et al. (2021) warned against introducing new constructs specific to leadership behavior in a pandemic because of the likely overlap with existing leadership constructs. The research described in this commentary demonstrates that previously studied contextual variables can be combined to describe a specific pandemic work environment and that performance in this environment can be predicted by established personality traits.

References

- Johnson, J. W.** (2017, April 27–29). Predicting leader performance from personality: Context is essential. In J. W. Johnson (Chair), *Don't take quotes or personality assessment validities out of context* [Symposium]. The Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology 32nd Annual Conference, Orlando, FL, United States.
- Johnson, J. W.** (2018, April 27–29). Improving validity and diversity through context-based leader selection. In A. B. Yost (Chair), *Work context effects on personality and leadership: Advancing theory and practice* [Symposium]. The Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology 33rd Annual Conference, Chicago, IL, United States.
- Johnson, J. W.** (2019, April 4–6). Development and validation of SHL's Leader Edge selection and development tool. In K. Sawyer (Chair), *SIOP Select: Distinguished professional contribution and M. Scott Myers* [Special event]. The Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology 34th Annual Conference, National Harbor, MD, United States.
- Judge, T. A., & Zapata, C. P.** (2015). The person-situation debate revisited: Effect of situation strength and trait activation on the validity of the Big Five personality traits in predicting job performance. *Academy of Management Journal*, *58*, 1149–1179.

- Rudolph, C. W., Allan, B., Clark, M., Hertel, G., Hirshi, A., Kunze, F., Shockley, K., Shoss, M., Sonnentag, S., & Zacher, H.** (2021). Pandemics: Implications for research and practice in industrial and organizational psychology. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology: Perspectives on Science and Practice*, **14**(1), 1–35.
- SHL** (2018). *Leader Edge technical manual*.
- Tett, R. P., & Christiansen, N. D.** (2007). Personality tests at the crossroads: A response to Morgeson, Campion, Dipboye, Hollenbeck, Murphy, and Schmitt (2007). *Personnel Psychology*, **60**, 967–993.