Commentary

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Navigating the Storm: An Exquisite Leadership Insight into Healthcare Management amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

This article presents a reflective analysis of the role of public leadership within the context of crises, advocating for increased involvement of public health experts in crisis management. The study delves into the intricate dynamics that executives and board members exhibit when faced with crises. A primary focus of this research is the essential aspects that illuminate the engagement of public officials in the ongoing crisis, notably rapid decision-making and innovative thinking. The article underscores the paramount importance of leaders emphasizing values and mission while employing clear, meaningful, and empathetic communication. A comprehensive comprehension of public leadership emerges as a pivotal factor in crisis management, particularly when devising policy remedies for public health emergencies. The criticality of nurturing a new generation of healthcare CEOs and elevating the visibility of public health roles is underscored as an imperative for adeptly addressing the array of crises confronting us. This article broadens our insights into the multifaceted responsibilities of human resource management in both crisis response and recovery. Consequently, this endeavor facilitates the identification of evolving leadership roles essential for efficacious crisis management, fostering preparedness for prospective public health challenges.

Even though organizations are subject to crises regularly, the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic may be an exception due to its scope and concurrent effect on the health and well-being of employees and other stakeholders and its worldwide peculiarity and impact on economics and, eventually, organizational survival. Several key lessons can be learned from this catastrophe in terms of executive leadership and governance.[1–3] To resolve the COVID-19 crisis difficulties, business leaders must take the initiative. A calamity of this magnitude will almost certainly transform the post-crisis financial and business landscape, as well as the new normal. The recovery and survival of an organization are influenced in part by economic, public health, and regulatory elements outside its control, for example, the state of the economy. However, the responses of its governance and leadership will significantly impact the outcome.

There are several horizons in which the required actions must be carried out, including *respond*, during which an organization encounters with the proximate effects and maintains endurance; *recover*, during which an organization picks up and reclaims its position; and *reimagine*, during which an organization foresees and equips for the next normal state.[3–5] Recognizing these, regardless of how confronting or difficult the issue appears to be, leaders will be expected to make harsher judgments and move more quickly to succeed.

Because disasters and other extreme events have occurred frequently throughout history and civilizations, there is already a substantial amount of research on crisis management.[1,5–7] While this short reflective piece is prompted by research on governance and leadership in a crisis context, it is, more specifically, a thoughtful analysis of how leaders and their organizations respond to a crisis and strategy for the new normal in the aftermath of a disaster. Leaders were defined in this article in a broader sense to include members of the executive board and directors on the board.[8]

Due to advancements in science and technology, substantial advances in life expectancy and health care systems, and a relatively long era of international peace and political stability, the pandemic of COVID-19 has arisen as a sudden threat to many things we take for granted in our daily lives. The discovery of a novel coronavirus has raised crucial issues, not just about the virus itself but also about how governments in various nations responded initially to the outbreak of the virus. When we look back and ahead, we all question whether leaders could have done something in a different way to aid in the fight against a pandemic of this scope.

In this light, resolving the challenge of COVID-19 emphasizes the crucial need for a potent public leadership, a form of collaborative leadership where local bodies and agencies work together to create shared value for the common good.[1,2,9,10] While some academics describe leaders as administrative officials who administer the government and non-profit organizations,[11,12] others define public leaders as elected political leaders who serve in their

respective political parties.[5,12,13] The stretch between political responsiveness and administrative responsibility, and the changing role of leadership in the context of growing cross-sector collaboration, are among the numerous competing demands placed on leaders who have been frequently highlighted in the literature.[3,14–16]

This paper is a commentary on how leaders and their organizations are seeking to strategize for the next normal. In our opinion, boards of directors are meeting more frequently and their chairman and non-executive directors are more "hands-on" than usual during the current crisis.

The Emergence of a New Normal

Customer and stakeholder preferences are expected to be significantly changed due to a pandemic-scale exogenous shock, which will necessitate the transition to contactless trade and commerce. Several possible shifts that we are already anticipating include contactless and cashless business, an increase in the usage of online platforms, and the change to work-from-home opportunities across sectors. It is believed that many of these and other trends will continue, growing into the "new normal" and presenting unique opportunities for each industry and organization. As a result, leaders will have to rebuild their organizations to adapt to these changes while also creating and seizing new opportunities as they come. Even while it is tough to carve out time during the reaction phase to predict and strategize for the next normal, many firms have established Next Plan teams to accomplish just that. With data analytics, which include sentiment analysis, it is possible to detect and track down new trends and new customers and markets. Because of the rapid changes, boards of directors will need to review their skill matrices on a more frequent basis to ensure that they have the skills and the knowledge to meet future demands. For certain businesses, this will provide significant problems that will necessitate courageous leadership to topple established methods of doing things.

Leadership

For people in positions of authority, crises frequently provide complex leadership challenges.[1,17] Many responsibilities are expected of public officials, including the recognition and adaptation to the crisis and the development and implementation of actions to reinstate normalcy.[16,18] However, while the fundamentals of compelling crises leadership are often the same as those of effective non-crises leadership, the need for hierarchical and decisive leadership is enhanced in emergencies; whereas, transformational leadership is typically viewed as more critical in the running of public organizations.[1,3,10,16,19] According to Helsloot and Groenendaal (2017),[20] the more complicated a problem is when compared to crucial issues, the more progressive or distributed leadership is required to incorporate the opinions of many stakeholders.[5,21] Furthermore, public officials should engage with the people who elect them to the office.[18] Authorities need to communicate effectively to be perceived as leaders while carrying out their tasks to maintain control of the situation.[10] Public officials must have the ability and competence to correctly resolve public emergencies.[3,10,20]

A fresh crisis is examined by Kerrissey and Edmondson (2020),[22] who look at many outstanding leaders and propose lessons for leading during an emergency. These lessons are reviewed further below, emphasizing that automatic response is not always the best option in a crisis. Rather than doing so, leaders must concentrate on and assess the needs of their organizations during times of crisis.

Immediate Action

When faced with uncertainty and ambiguity, it is natural to look for additional information before deciding or taking action. Winning the race against time and delaying responses can be damaging during a crisis, and it is imperative to reply as promptly as possible. This is exemplified by Jacinda Arden's steadfast early approach in this pandemic to "go-hard-and-go-fast," as she puts it. Also, the rapid shift of teaching through online mode globally and encouraging teachers to telecommute helped mitigate health concerns.

Immediate Response to a Public Health Emergency

At the outset of the COVID-19 crisis, there were noticeable differences in making meaning of things among the 3 countries. As Boin and Hart pointed out, leaders often find themselves caught in the crossfire of incompatible directives: either do nothing and threat disaster or do too much and peril humiliation.[17] In general, the leader's ability to consistently recognize early signals of crises and to properly alert the public about the risk level was crucial to their future management or mismanagement of the crisis, depending on the situation.[3,20,23]

Another essential part of sense-making is risk assessment and responding to the circumstance, which goes hand in hand with response speed and situational awareness.[5,24] The problem was comprehended, which begins with the sense-making activity but has a significant impact on leadership decision-making and differs from nation to nation. Because of the scope and originality of the pandemic, mistakes and issues were unavoidable. What matters is how leaders respond to these misjudges, not whether or not they occur. These blunders must not be rationalized nor the blame shifted. On the other hand, great leaders would accept responsibility for their mistakes, work hard to learn from them, and remain focused on their objectives while addressing any future obstacles as they arise.

Decisions Made Within a Crisis

A further point to mention is that decision-making practices during the crises of COVID-19 differed significantly amongst countries, leading to vastly disparate effects. Beginning with the inadequacies of conventional risk management procedures in light of the enormity and uniqueness of this catastrophe, government officials were forced to devise ad hoc solutions to deal with the situation. The results were considerably influenced by existing processes and institutional structures.[5,25]

Keeping Up with the Times

Having a laser-like focus on the agreed-upon organizational goal and attaching it to the policy is a seductive way to think about being a good leader. As a result of the magnitude and originality of the pandemic in addition to the velocity with which it is spreading, influential leaders must constantly evaluate and modify their plans.[5,20,23] Furthermore, the range of expert perspectives that are received is crucial. Considering how quickly things may change in the wake of an pandemic and the repercussions for business, it's likely that the current board members must be changed, and new advisors may be required. Leadership must frame and apply real-time decisions on their teams, even if these decisions directly conflict with established governance principles.

Open and Clear Communication

Relying on ruthless news is never simple, especially when critical stakeholders, including customers, suppliers, and staff, are concerned. The temptation to underestimate the organization's vulnerability during a crisis like COVID-19 is strong.[23] On the other hand, leaders owe it to their constituents to depict reality honestly and be as truthful as possible about the facts that are known and others as "known unknowns." In any instance, if attempts to downplay the crisis are seen in retrospect, the future communication will lose credibility and the trust component, which are crucial for an efficient and effective organizational culture.[1]

A sense of optimism and hope for the future must be conveyed through communications to encourage stakeholders to channel their competence effectively. The demand for restricted optimism, in our opinion, is better described as follows: Apart from the delivery of bad news, effective communication, in general, is a critical component in crisis management. This is vital to make early and frequent communication, even when the knowledge is insufficient, to ensure success. A greater level of public speaking and inspiring abilities are essential components of a leader's skill set. We feel that they are significant during times of crisis, but some leaders communicate significantly more successfully than others in these situations.[1]

In a research-based paradigm, three critical components of effective leadership communication are identified and highlighted.[26] "Direction giving," "sense-making," and "empathy" are essential characteristics that leaders must concentrate upon if they are to encourage and elicit the best performance from their followers, according to Mayfield and Mayfield.[26] Researchers found that leaders overdo the direction-giving feature while underusing the other two characteristics, according to Mayfield and Mayfield's research.

Because the COVID-19 situation is still ongoing, our study is limited to the three essential tasks required to comprehend the leadership role in the current problem. While current leadership activities have a clear impact on how the crisis will be resolved and lessons learned for future crises, it is advisable to postpone examination of these duties for future studies. Using the three fundamental duties, we demonstrated how leadership was exerted in the management of the COVID-19 issue, especially by public health leaders, but also by political and administrative leaders. Given this circumstance, our key research questions focus on the areas in which public health leadership could have played a different role in crisis management. In the section on lessons learned and recommendations, we consider how we can encourage this type of leadership in the future and, more specifically, what role public health leaders (that is, individuals with vision, influence, and competencies regarding public health issues) should play in public health crises. Following our engagement with pertinent literature, we have made some additional remarks on three other critical modules that can bestow efficient and effective leadership and governance and the identified crucial dimensions required during times of crisis. These further observations are based on our engagement with pertinent literature.

Swiftness in Decision-Making

A positive result of the crisis response has been the rapid transformation of many organizations' operations to boost efficiency, generally through the swift adoption of new technology and, in some cases, through the spinning of existing income streams to generate new sources of revenue. The demand for a number of these pivots, like Unilever's transition from skincare to cleaning and hygiene products, is the driving force behind them. The formation or extension of online distribution channels and the evolution from B2B to B2C business models have been examples of pivots in various circumstances. On the other hand, many pivots are inspired by values that have a good impact on the surrounding community. As a result of these developments, Dior, Givenchy, and many other alcohol producers have switched from perfume production to hand sanitizer production (which has a low margin). Employment platform Hatch launched the Coronavirus Labour Exchange within a week to connect employers such as supermarkets looking to scale up with employees who have been stood down. Airbnb announced a global initiative to house 100 000 medical professionals and other first responders. The bulk of these pivots are extensions of present capabilities that align with the organization's strategy. Still, those that are value-driven will undoubtedly continue to develop goodwill and brand worth in the eyes of consumers and other stakeholders. While some of these pivots may be permanent, it is hoped that the quick decision-making that enabled them will become imprinted in the DNA of the businesses and become the new normal over the long term.

Thinking "Outside the Box"

A long-standing misconception that confident business leaders and academics are unwilling to venture outside their respective domains is dispelled by the fact that the difficulties faced by businesses and stakeholders in the workplace are rarely labeled and categorized. It will take "out-of-the-box thinking" to anticipate the inferences of the next normal and strategize to redesign their organizations to acclimate to changing appetites and capitalize on emerging prospects. This will include boundary-spanning roles and collaboration across organizations. However, while there is no "playbook" to lead during a crisis, other professions may learn lessons. The vital work by Carl von Clausewitz on military strategy, first published in 1853 and now required for reading at prestigious military academies,[27] is based on the premise that planning military campaigns is precarious due to unpredictable events that quickly render any thorough planning out-dated.[27] Aside from that, Von Clausewitz recalls that leaders must make decisions under considerable time restrictions and limited knowledge, as is typified by the environment of the pandemic, and provide strategies for dealing with these limits and inadequate knowledge.[1,5]

Most productive business executives read a lot and listen to speakers from a variety of disciplines and backgrounds on a routine basis. As a result, this problem emphasizes the significance of business educators revising their curriculum and pedagogics to prepare future leaders to be flexible value creators capable of thinking outside the box and "connecting the dots" across disciplines and domains. The current pandemic's impact, however, provides a chance to analyze the parallels, differences, and correlations between the current pandemic effect and those of previous pandemics, which could guide adjustments to the management of risk and business endurance plans.[1,23,28]

Recommendations

This paper makes a contribution to the existing body of research on crisis management by illuminating the role that a leader plays in

the ongoing crisis in global public health. Public health professionals are well-versed in a variety of measures for outbreak management, including the tracking of contacts and the imposition of quarantines. The magnitude of the current crisis, on the other hand, has endowed these typically routine actions concerning public health with a new dimension: Public health has emerged as the primary focus of the public discourse. Because of this, professionals in public health are now recognized not just as key figures in their specific industry, but also as influential figures in a significantly wider context.

To begin, it highlights the significance of gaining a more in-depth understanding of public leadership as a means to improve one's ability to handle crisis situations. This article identifies essential aspects necessary during times of crisis, such as values and purpose, swiftness in decision-making, and out-of-the-box thinking, and demonstrates how these might be used to explain some observed results. Values and purpose are essential during times of crisis because they provide a sense of direction, and directionlessness can be paralyzing. This is useful not just for illustrating what could have been done ex post but also for forecasting and creating policy responses ex ante, making it a valuable piece of evidence in both areas.

Second, it brought to light the significance of public as well as public health leaders in the management of the COVID-19 pandemic. Since public health has been in the spotlight for the past months, a new problem has arisen for the profession: Whereas public health professionals typically derive their legitimacy from the scientific method, the COVID-19 crisis compelled them to adopt a political role, in which truth is frequently much more relative. This presents a new challenge for the public health profession. In many cases, professionals in the field of public health were not adequately trained for this role. This contradiction became more obvious as the crisis continued to grow: Because the scientific evidence was equivocal, health professionals struggled to express the relevance and significance of the events that were occurring. In addition, they frequently did not participate fully in the procedures of crisis management, which either were not organized to collect their thoughts in a meaningful way, or they were overshadowed by other individuals who had higher skills in the political process. Last but not least, because they lacked appropriate experience, they were sometimes unable to completely appreciate the social, economic, or political ramifications of the crisis. This, in turn, limited their ability to influence decision-making in a positive manner.

The unfortunate reality is that the crisis is just evolving with its various variants. In spite of this, there are already significant things to learn from this experience, most notably on how to lead in the field of public health. First, it's possible that the breadth of the concept of public health needs to be rethought. The Health in All Policies Approaches,[29] which aims to encourage public health practitioners to better engage with sectors outside of the traditional health care sector that directly touch or are touched by public health phenomena, may gain prominence in the field of public health. The goal of these approaches is to encourage public health practitioners to better engage with sectors outside of the traditional health care sector that directly touch or are touched by public health phenomena. Second, those who work in public health may demand a new equilibrium between the administrative and political authority that they wield. This may entail gaining the knowledge necessary to navigate the complications that come along with larger political positions while simultaneously supporting decision-making that is based on evidence.[30] Third, this may call for not only a new generation of public health leaders but also a higher visibility in the public eye for the field of public health.[31,32] In contrast to medicine, which focuses on the well-being of an individual patient, public health considers the population as a whole. Nevertheless, medical doctors have played a prominent role in this crisis, in part because of a lack of understanding regarding the definition and value of public health. This has frequently been at the expense of public health professionals who are trained to apply this broad population lens to crises such as the one we are currently experiencing.

Conclusion

Following the COVID-19 crisis, public health leadership gained greater visibility in the public realm. The lessons learned from dealing with this particular scenario are informative for examining the actions taken and steering future crises similar to COVID-19 in a positive direction.[25] An external shock on the size of a pandemic will drastically disrupt the post-crisis society and the corporate landscape. Leading their organizations' transformations, including their governance structures and procedures as they adjust to the new normal, is critical for business leaders.

However, while the current COVID-19 crisis shares some characteristics with previous crises, it differs significantly in several important ways. First, this pandemic is a public health catastrophe, demanding a higher level of technical competence and experience than many other contemporary catastrophes, including the financial crisis.[5,30] Second, this public health crisis is unlike any other in terms of the ramifications it has, as well as the governments' ability to forecast it and the size of the crisis (Hannah *et al.*, 2009).[33] Because COVID-19 is a global challenge, it presents the same problem to countries with various environments. Finally, this pandemic intertwines the physiological, social, and economic components in ways that modern disease outbreaks have rarely done in the history of the world.

In this situation, resilience, a preference for speed above beauty, decision-making clarity, empathy, and the ability to maintain a sense of realism are all essential leadership attributes. One of the most important realizations for us was that leaders must return to their fundamental principles and purposes at times of crisis. The ability to communicate effectively during a crisis is critical, and research recommends that leaders handle direction-giving, sense-making, and empathy to motivate and elicit the most significant results from the teams.

According to Vladimir Lenin, "There are decades in which nothing happens, and weeks in which decades occur." We live in an era of exponential change, which gives enormous learning opportunities. In the immediate aftermath of the accident, several organizations have demonstrated their ability to make quick decisions. As a result, the firms that continue to adapt and change proactively will be the success stories of the future. It is unclear whether they will maintain their agility, learning aptitude, and engage in attitude and process reform to thrive in the new normal. At the end of the day, only time will tell.

Ethical Standards. Yes.

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