CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

COMMENTARY

Crisis demands leadership, so does our research

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Even for a journal with turnaround as quick as this one, events can sometimes overtake articles. The excellent focal article by Rudolph et al. (2020) highlights a range of research topics that are ripe for study in the current COVID-19 pandemic. Since the time of writing, however, the pandemic in the United States has grown more severe, there have been significant accompanying economic disruptions (including large-scale unemployment and underemployment, with many organizations closing permanently), federal troops are being deployed in some cities, and a national movement spurred by the murder of George Floyd has prompted the country to again consider its legacy of race relations and racism. In short, the situation Rudolph et al. wrote about is even more chaotic today than they envisioned.

Although we appreciate and agree with each of the areas Rudolph et al. (2020) identified, for us as leadership researchers, the section on leadership was critical, as it can affect all the others. Leaders on the ground, from front-line managers to senior leaders, currently have tremendous opportunity to affect the lives of their employees and the resilience of their organizations, and this is absolutely worthy of research attention. We first connect leadership and two of Rudolph et al.'s subtopics and then extend the immediate research agenda on leaders in times of crises.

Living in uncertain and unfamiliar times, such as during a global health crisis, leads to heightened emotions. In response, individuals seek to regain control and create predictability through projections of desired, oftentimes charismatic, qualities onto their leaders (Shamir & Howell, 1999)—indeed, Dixon et al.'s (2017) study of leadership "in extremis" found that in situations where lives are at risk, leaders are simultaneously engaged in sense making and sense giving. Viewed as a source of meaning and distress relief, leaders may be called upon to engage in increased social and organizational support while still attending to shareholder returns. Unquestionably, responsive research on leadership in the context of COVID-19 is warranted not only to further scholarship but also to offer evidence-based guidance to those organizational leaders on the ground who are guiding organizations (and the people within them).

Although existing scholarship and best practices give some insight for leading in times of crisis, the sheer magnitude and qualitative differences of today's cumulative events require new research on the role of leaders. Economic uncertainty and increased overhead due to personal protective equipment and safety compliance is pushing leaders to make fiscally responsible decisions. These decisions could be made at the sacrifice of their employees' job stability, livelihood through layoffs, and furloughs (Blustein et al., 2020). Similarly, societal cries for employer support of employees' mental and physical health amid the pandemic encourages leaders to give as much attention to their employee's well-being as they do their fiscal responsibilities. During a time in which people may be nervous for their own and their families' physical health upon a return to work, leaders must be attentive to the requests for organizational and leader support made by their employees. Confronted with these seemingly paradoxical forces, we contend that this crisis opens up the

opportunity for researchers to investigate the "double bottom line" and similar values-related leadership issues in an extreme context (contexts in which such exploratory research would be more effective; Streb, 2010).

When considered in the context of leadership, the question of the double bottom line becomes this: What defines leaders who are more successful in striking a balance between fiscal responsibility and employee well-being in such an intimidating time? The Work, Family, and Health Network's STAR (Support, Transform, Achieve Results) initiatives give us hope that it is possible to optimize both work effectiveness and employee well-being through what they call "dual-agenda work redesign." The model posits a perspective in which work goals and employee needs are not adversarial to organizational functioning but can complement organizational efforts and benefit employees (Fletcher & Bailyn, 2004). What may not yet be clear within the field includes *how* leaders effectively implement organizational change initiatives, such as a dual agenda work redesign initiative, when many other aspects of daily life are in flux.

Although the leadership literature has provided much insight into what kind of leaders are likely to successfully emerge out of turmoil and crisis, much research is still needed to understand leaders in times of multiple crises. The research has shown that leaders who are most effective in helping groups to escape panic typically begin with transformational support and encouragement (Bass & Riggio, 2006). By providing a vision for employees, transformational leaders are capable of encouraging commitment to the organization and follower satisfaction (Bass & Riggio, 2006). During times in which leaders are given the responsibility of reconciling a fragmented workforce, transformational leadership has been suggested to promote effective collective action (Burns, 1978). Organizations are being called to accommodate the unique needs of different employee groups (and their families). Taking this employee-centered approach to reimagining work requires individualized consideration from leaders. Although some employees may feel little stress from the effects of COVID-19 on their work life, other employees, such as those with immunocompromised family members, may feel extremely disrupted. Moreover, many employees in lower wage jobs may be experiencing cumulative stress due to many factors including physical illness, mental distress, and adverse impact. By tuning into people's lives and priorities outside of work, leaders are given the necessary perspective to address systemic needs.

We find that leaders are central to decisions that are made around all of the subtopics that were mentioned but specifically occupational health and safety and human resources (HR) policies. In line with the focal article, we believe that a discussion on the occupational health and safety for different employees, including those on the frontlines (i.e., nurses); those transitioning to working from home; and those experiencing furloughs, layoffs, and reduced hours, is necessary. Moreover, research should be conducted to determine the extent to which leaders have the ability to influence work stressors during a crisis (i.e., high workloads, hazardous work environments, building team cohesion and social support, enhancing communication strategies, fears of getting infected, negative emotions, and low perceived organizational support).

We propose advancing our understanding of how crises influence the workforce by asking questions such as "What is the critical influence of leaders on employee well-being (OHP)?" Through inspirational motivation, leaders have the ability to share an optimistic vision of the future and a mission that emotionally connects them to their followers and in turn motivates them to achieve what they have described as an attainable vision (Berson et al., 2001). By emotionally connecting to their employees, leaders may demonstrate psychological capital including traits such as hope, optimism, and resilience, which has been shown to escalate commitment (Huang et al., 2019) and improve firm performance (Peterson et al., 2009). Currently, the well-being of essential workers may be most threatened, particularly depleted from daily physical, cognitive, and emotional labor demands. Additionally, followers working from home may experience feelings of social isolation and may suffer negative consequences such as lower team performance due to high levels of expected individual autonomy (Langfred, 2004). During a time where many employees are expected to demonstrate high levels of autonomy through teleworking,

it is important to understand the novel methods leaders are using to monitor, connect, support, and develop their employees remotely.

On the subtopic of human resource policies, the focal article discusses the ways in which HR policies can be modified to allow for flexible work arrangements, especially for workers with family demands. Research has shown that increasing the control workers have in managing their daily schedules can help to limit the amount of employee turnover, ease work–family conflict, and improve employee well-being (Kelly et al., 2011; Moen et al., 2011). However, there is more to HR policies than demonstrating flexibility around schedules. Understanding how HR policies can be adjusted through leaders advances our overarching understanding of the effects of crises on the workforce. We find ourselves asking questions such as "How do HR policies enable or prevent front-line managers from supporting their employees' well-being right now?" At this time, change within organizations is inevitable and includes procedural and organizational changes, employee/customer relationship changes, colleague relationship changes, and much more. HR policies have been shown to help encourage the espousal of new behaviors, reduce follower stress and uncertainty, facilitate transformative change, and increase organizational commitment and satisfaction (Bish et al., 2015).

In terms of HR policies, leaders often act as gatekeepers and may have the ability to advocate for policy changes for their employees. The great "undoing" of 2020 provides a novel opportunity for researchers to look into follower-targeted outcomes when leaders effectively disseminate and leverage new (and existing) HR policies to promote and ensure employee uptake during crises. In prioritizing both individual needs and organizational goals, HR policies and leaders can maximize employee well-being needs as well as financial requirements for the organization with their employees. Researchers can explore the importance of leadership in change management that includes redesigning work priorities and practices to enact a clear double bottom line. Through the lens of these models, we find that during a time in which individuals are expressing unmet needs and demanding action from their leaders, there is much to learn about how leaders and HR policy reciprocally interact in efforts to prioritize organizational demands (fiscal and employee needs). Also, understanding the ways in which HR policies may prevent managers from assisting their employees across the other subtopics mentioned in the focal article is indispensable for future crises.

COVID-19 is providing industrial and organizational (I-O) psychologists with an opportunity to study the influence of leaders on many subtopics. We theorize that leaders during these times are demonstrating their hierarchy of values to their employees, specifically how they balance the care of their employees and the care of their finances. Among others, Schein (2010) has noted that organization members watch leaders in times of crisis to see whether they live up to the values. Organizations may be *talking the talk, but not walking the walk*. As so many organizations have released statements stating the well-being of their employees, both physically and mentally, is the overarching priority during this time, some may not follow through with those promises.

According to the idiosyncrasy credits model, leaders accumulate credit in the eyes of their followers such that status in the eyes of followers is seen as a credit balance (Hollander, 2009). When leaders have accumulated enough credit and trust in their employees, they can take advantage to try something idiosyncratic (e.g., making an unexpected strategic decision, hiring a person who is not seen by others as a good candidate). If the idiosyncratic decision "pays off," then the leader acquires substantially more credit, having demonstrated that they know when to conform and when to deviate from the norm; if the decision fails, then they lose credit and have to begin earning it again. An often-overlooked element of this model is that followers look to leaders—that is, to those who have accumulated idiosyncrasy credits over time—and expect them to lead. When those seen as having the ability to lead don't, others become distressed or angry and the person's credits are lost. In a time of crisis, such as the one described by Rudolph et al. (2020) and magnified as we have discussed, followers are looking to leaders to lead. Those leaders who do the

expected thing will likely accrue credit from their followers, whereas the responses to those who pursue idiosyncratic paths will likely depend on their credit going into the decision. Organizational researchers have the opportunity to examine the status that leaders hold during and postcrisis, relative to their standing precrisis, and Hollander's (1958, 2009) model provides clear guidance for hypothesis building.

Given the state of the world, we argue now is the time to look at whether organizations who proclaim a double bottom line are living out their claims and what kind of an effect it has on their survival during times of chaos. Moreover, the context of pre-COVID-19 prioritization of employee well-being may moderate follower perceptions. That is, employees in person-centered organizations may be expecting more accommodations and prioritization of employee well-being and not as many layoffs as is historically common in bottom-line-focused organizations. We suggest this boundary condition points to the lack of a "one-size-fits-all" approach to leadership responses and universal prediction of employee response to leader behaviors, specifically as it relates to their response to preserving the organization's fiscal demands.

In conclusion, we again applaud the work done by Rudolph et al. (2020) in laying out the research topics that I-O psychologists need to be studying now. We suggest that researchers should investigate the ways in which a disconnect between declared values and enacted values (e.g., a stated commitment to a double bottom line/dual agenda culture that is seemingly abandoned for the single bottom line when crisis hits) plays a role in organizational survival during a pandemic. Finally, we hope this commentary serves as an extension to the many research topics discussed in the focal article and expands on the "grand challenge" proposed by the authors.

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