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COMMENTARY

Leadership in the time of COVID: Should we really throw the baby out with the bathwater?

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Many organizations have been forced to enact significant changes in the way they operate their businesses and manage their human capital in a short period as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The focal article by Rudolph et al. (2021) highlights many of these changes as well as presenting several implications for practice and research (and presumably theory) in industrial-organizational (I-O) psychology going forward. Specifically, they identify 10 subject areas where they believe COVID-19 will have a demonstrative influence and therefore should be, by implication, the focus of research and practice.

Although the discussion and focus on these topics is critically important, and the collective whole is reflective of what many organizations are facing, we believe it is important to reflect on the call to action for change in our constructs, policies, and practices (in particular) en mass without first examining the very premise that all of these have or will fundamentally change as a result of COVID-19. This reflects a conceptual argument based on the stability and rigor of prior theory and research into some of the core I-O constructs identified as well as an ongoing concern as echoed by practitioners in prior *IOP* focal articles and commentaries over the past few years on the overemphasis on the bright shiny object syndrome in I-O psychology particularly as it relates to practice (Adler et al. 2016; Church & Silzer, 2014; Rotolo et al., 2018). In the current context, we focus on the topic of leadership and corporate leadership models as our example, though the same argument can be applied to other constructs.

In short, we contend that how corporations define great leadership in their company need not change for the sake of change itself based on COVID-19, particularly if the models are based on theory, research, and detailed validation efforts. Such a call for action may be misleading if not problematic for practitioners with key responsibilities in the areas of talent management (TM), leadership development, organization development change, and related content areas. By over-emphasizing the need for change, we are concerned that some practitioners (both external consulting psychologists and internal professionals) will be faced with mounting pressure from their leaders to change for change's sake (e.g., to seemingly address the COVID-19 dynamic) rather than change for the right reasons (e.g., as a result of new leadership or the desire for a dramatic change in culture). Instead, we would propose that practitioners (and by implication researchers) focus on how their existing leadership constructs may shift, amplify, or otherwise receive further prominence in the corporate setting rather than "throw the baby out with the bathwater." Whether the focus is leadership or the other topics cited in the focal article, to signal a call for fundamental change at the scale required for large global organizations with complex

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operating models, structures, and cultures without first establishing a strong and data-driven rationale for doing so may result in misdirected and unnecessary efforts at best and perhaps even damage elements of an organization's foundation in the long term.

Organizational context

To illustrate how the COVID-19 pandemic has driven both real change in how an organization is operating currently as well as launching new thinking going forward with respect to culture, practices, and behaviors, we take PepsiCo, a global food and beverage consumer goods organization, as an example. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, PepsiCo, as is the case with many organizations, moved from a largely face-time-based culture and workforce to fully remote in a matter of weeks. Approximately 30,000 employees are currently working remotely given the pandemic, with some returning slowly to office environments in different parts of the world depending on local conditions. With this massive change, senior leaders are continuing to review internal employee data and external benchmarking information to help them plan for the future of a new more flexible way of working. These discussions focus on creating new policies and guidelines, manager capability building, and offering support and identifying resources to help our workforce balance many of the issues identified in the focal article, such as childcare needs and managing the way work is physically accomplished for those employees who cannot work from home. However, one could argue everything we do, from a human resource (HR) and TM perspective, has been targeted for review and change. Because the nature of the pandemic is so unique to our current experience, senior leaders and HR professionals are looking to external sources of information to help guide their decision-making. Although it would be nice to have formal research literature available to address their questions (as the focal authors suggest and which we fully endorse), the tenor of the questions and the ways in which the nonacademic (i.e., popular press and business consulting) literature position them is where we have concerns. We would strongly advocate for a more research-focused agenda first before declaring that practice needs to change at the same time.

Why are we arguing this point so aggressively? Aside from the issue of pushing the need for change, we would also posit that the "change" may be more subtle than radical. In fact, from our perspective, the organizational shifts observed, as a result of COVID-19, although rapid, were not particularly novel. In fact, we would assert that large organizations with strong TM and HR functions have been working on many of these topics for years (Church & Ezama, 2020). Whether the topic is employee experience, engagement, flexible and remote working models, good versus great managers or leader characteristics, or even recognition and relationship building, the focus on progressive thinking, research, and theory have been present for years. The call to action then should be more of a build or expand approach rather than endorse a holistic change mentality.

As an example, for many industries, the move to virtual or remote work and integration of technology has been progressing for decades. Drawing on the previous example, PepsiCo leaders prior to the pandemic, whether in office or remote, were well accustomed to working with teammates who are dispersed across locations and in different time zones. In fact, recent internal employee surveys show positive employee responses to the pandemic around PepsiCo values and the shift to remote work. Employees reported record levels of engagement and increases from pre-pandemic levels around many of the core elements that shape culture at PepsiCo, including their ability to focus and get things done fast, voice opinions fearlessly, celebrate success, and connect with coworkers. Similarly, from a broader strategic TM perspective, PepsiCo's approach to leadership has been quite consistent and stable over the past 20 years as well. While the most recent version of PepsiCo's leadership model, launched in 2020 just prior to the pandemic, includes constructs such as agility, the core aspects of "setting the agenda for employees", "taking others with you", and "doing it the right way" have been incredibly consistent and capable

of flexing throughout PepsiCo's history. Having a separate model for in-office or remote employ-ees, as suggested in the focal article, would be antithetical to driving a consistent framework and language for assessment, leadership development, and talent planning efforts. As a result, we argue that when it comes to many TM processes, COVID-19 does not require a new framework or lens for addressing the consequences nor does it necessitate a complete change in how we think about TM. Instead, it may simply require us to lean more heavily into certain aspects of our leadership model and existing TM processes or to scale existing ideas in response to the nature of the change observed.

In response to the focal article presented by Rudolph et al.(2021), we would like to caution readers on two points. First, we urge academics and practitioners alike not to fall prey to the lure of the "bright and shiny" (or in this case the "grim and scary") proclamations by external industry experts/voices. Second, we encourage our colleagues to apply a broader systems thinking lens (e.g., Katz & Kahn, 1978) to their HR and TM efforts in light of the pandemic, considering what we already know about existing constructs and phenomena (including their stability across time and circumstance) as well as what practices we already implement. We use one of the 10 areas identified in the focal article, Leadership, as our primary reference example throughout this reply, noting that parallel arguments could be made for many of the areas outlined in the focal article. Leadership serves as a prime example given the extensive interest, albeit controversial, for both an academic and practitioner audience.

Don't fall prey to the "Bright and Shiny"

As one of the authors of this reply noted in a previous *IOP* commentary, "The world of consulting is full of fads, trends, and even charlatans promoting their own advice, frameworks, products, and technology, much of which has no basis in theory or research" (Church & Silzer, 2016; Dunnette, 1990). Practicing within this world, our job as I-O professionals is to take a step back and critically examine the merits of the requests we receive to implement new tools and processes. Just because senior leadership has a desire to implement something new does not mean that it will be effective. The introduction of anything new in research and practice should help us to explain or address phenomena in ways that current constructs and processes cannot. Echoing the point made by the authors in the focal article, any new construct should add incremental value to our existing theo-ries and predictive models. We may find that the "new" is a waste of time and resources or, at the more extreme end as noted by Church and Silzer (2016), an unwarranted risk to the organization.

Concerning in the current environment is that the pandemic has provided an opening for non evidenced ideas to flourish. As noted by Rotolo and colleagues (2018), in their call for action to end bad talent management, volatile, uncertain, chaotic, and ambiguous forces in the external environment are bound to influence business strategy and the need for talent management by raising both evidenced and non-evidence-based approaches. Without a doubt, the COVID-19 pandemic is a perfect storm for bad talent management to occur. A quick Google search of "Leadership and COVID-19" results in multiple articles promising speed, simplicity, and novelty with references to constructs like resilience, empathy, health, and creativity. The latter example, creativity, is one that hits particularly close to home at PepsiCo. Several years ago, in response to a *Harvard Business Review (HBR)* article on the topic, we received a request from senior leadership to incorporate the construct more explicitly into our leadership models and assessment tools (the same request has been made for digital fluency, grit, and emotional intelligence over the years all following similar *HBR*, *Fast Company*, or consulting firm-sponsored publications). Robust inter-nal validation research efforts showed that measures of this construct did not add any incremental predictive value above and beyond what was already captured. By taking a step back and ques-tioning the request, we identified that a measure of creativity was not required to be embedded into our talent management practice. As such, we caution practitioners, who are grappling with

current organizational change due to the external environment, against implementing measures of constructs or exciting new practices that may seem novel on the surface. The suggestion in the focal article, for example, that "organizations should select leaders who possess the relevant knowledge, skills, and personality characteristics to successfully navigate the unique demands of a crisis, such as the current pandemic" raises all sorts of potential issues for practice when we have no way of validating selection tools of this nature and where many of the "new ways of leading" are largely names for preexisting competencies (e.g., authenticity/communication), capabilities that reflect more than pure leadership (e.g., empathy, emotional intelligence) or even totally not related to leadership but something else entirely. Case in point, Rudolph et al. (2021, Table 1) cite an article from a *Fast Company* piece that outlines eight critical leadership areas. Most of the featured areas are not leadership dimensions in the traditional I-O psychology sense at all, nor are they useful (or valid) for talent decision making.

Leadership is leadership

Many talent management processes, particularly those foundational for many organizations' practices, such as leadership competency models or frameworks, are designed with change in mind and tied to an organization's strategic business goals (Pahalad & Hamel, 1990; Shippmann et al. 2000). Indeed, in a popular *HBR* article, Pahalad and Hamel (1990) defined core organizational competencies as the knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics that drive an organization's capacity to respond to change in a dynamic marketplace. Similarly, PepsiCo's leadership framework is rooted in strategic business goals and, by design, describes future-focused behavior via KSAOs that tend to be relatively stable across time and circumstance. The framework is based on the Leadership Potential BluePrint (Church & Silzer, 2014; Silzer & Church, 2009; Silzer et al. 2016), which represents a comprehensive approach to understanding potential based on decades of theory and research across a number of disciplines (e.g., Silzer & Church, 2010). The BluePrint incorporates foundational (e.g., cognitive, social and interpersonal skills), growth (e.g., motivation), and career dimensions (e.g., leadership and functional expertise). Growth dimensions, serving as an illustrative example, are defined as KSAOs that facilitate or enhance an individual's ability to be successful in new roles, situations, and environments. As such, these dimensions account for change and foundational components of leadership in the framework. Echoing this point, in the academic literature, even while acknowledging the role of context, Zaccaro et al. (2018) point out the need for process models to incorporate a wider range of attributes and capacities to account for unique variance associated with different leadership outcomes.

At PepsiCo, there have been at least six "new" leadership models introduced over the past 20 years with each change in the strategic direction of the organization. The reality of these changes though were not in the DNA of the leadership approach but in the nuances of communication and contextualization. Although what elements of leadership were emphasized more or less (i.e., the "ratio" of ingredients) shifted with the strategic direction of the organization during each period, the "core ingredients" did not change (see Church et al., 2018 for a detailed history). To illustrate, Steve Reinemund, CEO from 2001 to 2006, emphasized inclusion, with a goal to make diversity one of the key drivers of culture and performance (Church et al., 2014; Thomas & Creary, 2009). His successor, Indra Nooyi, focused on building PepsiCo for the future through an emphasis on sustainability (Nooyi & Govindarajan, 2020) and bringing the outside in to drive growth and innovation. The leadership framework at that time placed heavy emphasis on competencies such as financial acumen, strategic agility, global acumen, and industry knowledge. Most recently, Ramon Laguarta shifted organizational focus to driving performance and simplification, highlighting competencies focused on consumers and decision making. Although the concept of strategic agility is still present in PepsiCo's current GREAT5 competency model

(as we recognize it as a vital ingredient to leadership success; See Church & Ezama, 2020 for an overview), it now is one of the 14 subfactors in the model and is part of the broader dimension of thinking. The point here is that you may need to lean in more heavily toward certain aspects of your talent management processes considering the current volatile global environment, but that doesn't mean you need to toss the baby out with the bathwater. A well-executed process accounts for organizational change and can adapt appropriately.

In sum, based on our knowledge of the literature and decades of collective experience at PepsiCo, we offer the following suggestions to I-O psychologists both academics and practitioners, as well as our HR professionals and business partners.

1. *Question rather than blindly implement emerging ideas or practices.* Although the world may be in a state of flux, this does not mean our field must be as well. We fully agree with Rudolph et al.'s (2021) 10 areas of focus for future research and exploration; however, we urge readers to question the urgent need for new practices in these areas. In this environment, new ideas are bound to emerge, but we recommend the field question their value before jumping ship. If your existing programs or frameworks are robust, validated, and add value, at least ask why more than once before changing them for the sake of the crisis.
2. *Focus energy on expanding existing practices.* As a starting point, with changing organizational strategy due to the current environment, we implore researchers to consider a social systems perspective (e.g., taking an organization development mindset) in how preexisting practices or recommendations can be amended to fit new structures or strategies. Further, for practitioners we recommend revisits existing practices to see how they can address existing challenges. This means approaching the need for change from a much more holistic view (e.g., of many of the 10 areas identified together) rather than 1 by 1 as areas for study or new practice design and implementation.

In short, new is almost always exciting but not always better, and sometimes it's worse.

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