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CRISIS LEADERSHIP: THE ART OF NAVIGATING ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract: Organizational transformation is one of the steps leaders can take to survive and adapt to the current situation. Organizations that do not transform in a certain period will be left behind, even collapse, because of the dynamic nature of consumers and markets. Transformation is driven by internal factors such as the need for efficiency, revenue enhancement, and increasing employee prosperity. Meanwhile, external factors that trigger transformation include competition with competitors, technological advancement, and demand for adaptation to consumer needs and desires changes. Leaders have many references to adopt for navigating transformation in the normal situation. However, they have few references on navigating transformation in the Covid-19 pandemic situation. The Covid-19 pandemic has implied implementing a remote working system to minimize viral transmission. Such a system poses many challenges to leaders and employees as they have never practiced it. Failure of the leaders to navigate transformation will seriously harm the organization and even lead to collapse. The present study aims to identify some applicable competencies for leaders in navigating organizational transformation during the pandemic. This study used a qualitative method with semi-structured interviews as the data collection technique. The thematic analysis was conducted to analyze responses from interview questions. 14 informants were involved in this study. They consisted of general and senior managers transforming the pandemic situation. The results of this study revealed four major competencies, namely task competencies, human relation competencies, adaptive competencies, and virtual competencies in navigating transformation during the pandemic situation.



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The organizational transformation has become one of the solutions for an organization to deal with business challenges in order to survive and even increase revenue. Making transformation or customers will leave has been frequently emphasized in managerial meetings. This principle is consistent with the primary responsibility of leaders to ensure organizational survival through organiza-

tional transformation. The Internal factors that trigger transformation include the need for efficiency, revenue enhancement, and improving employee prosperity, while the external factors involve competition, technology development, customer demand, and even crisis.

The crisis has hit and shaken most organizations during which the Covid-19 pandemic was officially declared. The critical situation has been identified in various including a highly urgent situation that needs a firm decision from organization leaders (Karasavidou and Alexopoulos, 2019). The crisis threatened stakeholders' hope, was unpredictable and affected the entire organizational performance (Bundy et al., 2017). The characteristic of a crisis as a rare event significantly impacts and affects stakeholders (Tomczyk and Walker, 2021). The crisis that hit organizations created various problems, such as employment layoffs, decreased company revenue, and failure to realize long-term and short-term plans that have been proposed. Leaders are posed various challenges during the crisis, such as the need for the right decisions that do not escalate further excess under limited time and reference and lack of preceding experiences. Therefore, understanding the context of crisis comprehensively and correctly help the leaders navigate their organization in the right direction.

Pressures during the crisis pushed organization leaders to take immediate but correct actions. One of the quick steps to be decided is organizational transformation to adapt to the pandemic situation and conditions. On the other hand, leaders should also make a correct decision to minimize Covid-19 transmission by implementing physical distancing among employees. Both steps were tough to perform simultaneously because it took adaptation, time, and high cost. Transformation in a normal situation can fail, and it is even highly likely to fail in a pandemic crisis. The probability of failure is higher, and organizations that try to make a change can even face a new problem. The situation became more complicated as employees had to work remotely during the transformation process. It absolutely requires leaders' ability to navigate their organization.

The earlier studies revealed certain competencies that leaders should have to deal with the crisis (Harter, 2020, Hatami et al., 2021). To cope with the crisis, leaders must build connections and collaborate with other parties (Fernandez and Shaw, 2020). In a crisis, leaders should also be able to perform under pressures and uncertain conditions (Lawton-Misra and Pretorius, 2021). Plans and responses based on past experiences are inapplicable in the crisis. Instead, leaders are preferably able to look forward and make a new plan without previous experience ((D'Auria and De Smet, 2020). The crisis can be a starting point for organizations and leaders to make positive changes by seizing the opportunities (Gkeredakis et al., 2021). The concept of leadership in crisis management emphasizes the effort to minimize the harms or impacts of a crisis and to reestablish the system once the crisis has passed (Bundy and Pfarrer, 2015). Good leadership will receive positive responses from employees, build self-confidence and clear up doubts in dealing with uncertainties (Dyrbye et al., 2020). In contrast, bad leadership will evoke negative responses from employees and cause anxiety, doubts, and fears.

The COVID-19 pandemic has become one of the greatest health crises of this century and hugely affects work interaction and business. The pandemic has brought an alarming impact on Indonesia (Nugroho, 2020). Direct interaction has slowly changed to indirect interaction through technology-mediated interaction. Massive changes in the use of technology have made the pandemic one of the accelerators of technological transformation, especially digitalization in organizations (Sein, 2020). Research on virtual leadership in a pandemic analyzes remote leadership and changing leadership under changing situations (Uhl Bien, 2021).

The major distinctions that differentiate virtual leadership from conventional leadership are geographical distance and technology as an intermediary tool. Future leaders lead virtually (Schmidt and Wood, 2019). One characteristic that makes remote and virtual leadership similar, as the scholars agree, is remote and virtual leaders cannot use the same mechanisms and ways of leading as face-to-face leadership (Chamakiotis et al., 2021). The interac-

tion of leaders and employees in remote leadership relies on technology as the main medium of interaction (Bartsch et al., 2020). A significant investment of time and effort to organize humans also becomes one of the differences in virtual leadership (Wilson, 2021).

Furthermore, communication challenges and the level of trust between leaders and employees become one of the challenges in virtual leadership (Slade, 2015). The performance of remote leaders is demonstrated through the clarity of their direction for the team, the priority scale, personal responsibility, and providing feedback and opportunities for the team to learn (Hickman, 2021). Various challenges are posed by remote leaders, such as minimal face-to-face interaction, adjusting the individual with team goals, ensuring the team members have equal access and ability to work remotely, and trust between others and between leaders and employees (Levasseur, 2012).

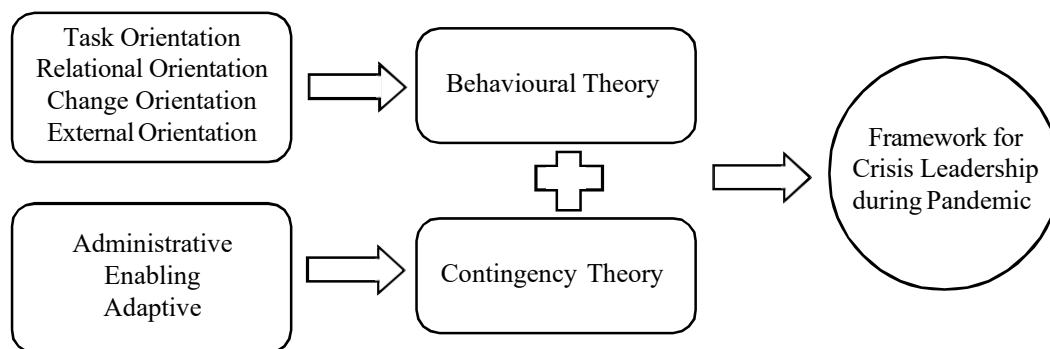
Various challenges in running remote work are posed by both the leaders and the followers simultaneously, such as the rise in the stress level of employees, incomplete work, fatigue, unfulfilled deadline, stuck communication, and irrelevant demands (Hickman, 2021). Researchers have reached a consensus about an uncertain and complex environment that leaders have to play a clear role in such a situation. During the Covid-19 pandemic, leadership work has become more complicated and

frontally should shift to the remote style (Bartsch et al., 2020) that has only gained little attention in the previous studies.

Navigating transformation in a time of crisis needs some competencies to identify. Competencies are the ability of individuals to perform their tasks and roles (Boyatzis, 2008) based on their attitude, knowledge, and behavior. Competencies are learned and can be developed through iterative processes based on their professional roles and life experiences (Johari et al., 2022). Leadership framework during the crisis has driven this study to define what competencies are needed in navigating transformation during the pandemic.

METHOD

This study used a qualitative method. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with the leaders involved in an organizational transformation process during the Covid-19 pandemic. Qualitative research involves a fairly complex research process to explore and describe the experiences of individuals involved in an event (Hirose and Creswell, 2022). Perceptions of the leaders about the processes and competencies they implemented while navigating the transformation were explored through in-depth interviews. 14 leaders were selected based on some criteria with the following demographic characteristics of the informants in table 1.



Source : Hertelendy et al. (2021)

Figure 1. A conceptual Framework for Crisis Leadership During a Pandemic Based on Behavioural Theory and Contingency Theory

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of The Informants

Group level	Total	Male	Female	Age (year)	Job tenure (Year)
General Manager	2	1	1	48 - 51	>20
Senior Manager	12	8	4	35 - 49	10 - 17

Informants

Informants are research subjects that provide information about the phenomena explored in the study (Martono, 2014). This study selected the key or the primary informant. The key informants have complete information about the problems raised in this study. They include leaders at the general manager level. The key informants who know the technical and detailed situation are senior managers who manage the day-to-day navigational transformation process. All informants were coded based on the predetermined category. Data collection was conducted during the time of the pandemic, which was from June 2020 to December 2020.

Materials and Procedures

Data collection was performed using semi-structured interviews. Open-ended interview questions were administered to the informants to collect as much information as possible. The interview with each informant lasted between one to two hours using telephone and video conference. Leadership theories, crisis leadership, transformation, and competencies were guideline topics for creating the interview protocol. The protocol consisted of four major parts: the decision process among the leaders, interaction processes during remote work, technology utilization, and leaders' role in organizational transformation amid the Covid-19 pandemic. Besides interviews, daily job activity logs were also collected from informants during the data collection period. The job activity logs served as an additional source to obtain more detailed information about the actual experiences of leaders in ongoing situations (Kelemen et al., 2020)

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns and find themes in data col-

lected by researchers (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The first stage of the analysis involved understanding the data. Data from interviews with and activity logs of informants were collected and repeatedly read to find the true meaning and purpose. During the interview process, the leaders gave detailed descriptions of their experiences in navigating transformation during the pandemic situation. The second stage was preparing codes. The coding process was conducted to give a label to the interview transcripts that have been generated from the previous data collection process. The coding process was used to categorize information relevant to leader competencies. The third stage of thematic analysis was generating themes based on the data. The themes reflected the pattern of the phenomenon being studied and were in line with the aims of this study. It is to identify the main competencies of leaders in navigating transformation during the pandemic.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From the analysis, this study found four key competencies that the leaders had and practised in navigating transformation during the pandemic: human relations, task, adaptation, and virtual competencies.

Human Relation Competencies

Navigating transformation in a pandemic Covid 19 situation posed many challenges to leaders, especially maintaining relationships with their employees. Changes in normal situations are not always accepted and even rejected (Worley and Mohrman, 2014). Leaders during the navigation process demonstrated competencies in cultivating relations with their employees and their surrounding environment. Good relations set a foundation for the team to respond to transformation in the covid 19 pandemic situation.

“Relation with employee become a key entry for transformation. Employees should receive comprehensive and correct information from the leaders to prevent misunderstanding. Good relations based on trust and respect will open opportunities for bi-directional communication to reach agreement and facilitate execution of transformation plans that have been designed (R1)”.

During the transformation process, leaders become performance referents for employees. In the pandemic situation, leaders also play a role in protecting employees that face a lot of uncertainty (Maclean et al., 2022). On the other side, employees see the leaders as inspiring to perform the transformation during the pandemic. Leaders inspire the environment through positive actions while turning arising problems into new opportunities for growth.

“The pandemic situation requires adaptations in all areas. Employees see the leader as a role model when the transformation takes place. In the pandemic, the leaders become one of the backs and shelter from uncertainty. They will not tolerate any violation or disobedience committed by the leaders. It brings pressure, but we can turn this situation into an advantage with good management. Leaders can position themselves as a source of inspiration through compliance with the health protocols, executing transformations based on the road map, and other positive things (R3)”.

“The empathy that we show is able to build attachment and the desire to survive with the team (R7)”.

Leaders that show empathy in case the employees find difficulties to adapt with transformation and face challenges of remote work receive positive feedback from their employees. Employee resistance to change decreases, acceptance of new ideas increases, and eventually, will be more willing to adapt to change. Leaders put empathy with the team members and involve others through an inclu-

sive approach manage to build interpersonal relationships, alleviate work stress, and enhance trust and team engagement to go through the process. Conscious and empathetic leadership can reduce a team’s desire to move and increase relationship resilience (Wibowo and Paramita, 2022). The presence of leaders while working remotely facilitated by technology can eliminate the feeling of alienation and disconnection from the organization and their work environment among the employees.

Task Competencies

The transformation situation urges the leaders to complete various tasks, from planning and implementation to supervision. Effective leaders are among the main resources of an organization both in normal situations and crises (Zhang et al., 2012). Preparation and planning include identifying crises, developing emergency protocols, managing the protocols to ensure their implementation, allocating resources to handle the crisis and monitoring and preparing emergency plans.

“Organizational transformation adds leaders’ responsibilities in creating a plan, implementing, and supervising the programs to meet the target (R6)”.

“During the pandemic, leaders should show positive responses in order to think clearly. The ability to correctly identify situations becomes one of the guidelines to decide what steps to take and to define necessary supports (R10)”.

Intense and open communication by leaders can minimize employee bias and misperceptions. Effective, open, clear, and intense communication of a leader can improve team engagement in preparing for emergency risk response. Using good communication skills, a leader can convey a clear vision of transformation while fostering a sense of shared goals to all team members.

“Communication between leaders and employees becomes more intense because many changes need to be coordinated (R8)”.

“The unprecedented pandemic situation with lack of best-practice references requires such open communication that we all share a common understanding. Information bias will be detrimental because the vision and mission of transformation cannot be conveyed correctly, and consequently, the targets cannot be fulfilled (R4)”.

“The pandemic restricts access to direct communication because all employees should work from home. Effective and clear communication can silence rumour due to confusing information (R4)”.

Collaboration skills of the leaders to cooperate with internal and external parties play a crucial role in situations under limited resources. Organizations rarely allocate sufficient resources for crisis management and disaster preparedness (Bowers et al., 2017).

“Resource allocation in time of disaster rarely crosses the mind. Under extremely limited conditions, as leaders, we need to collaborate to ensure that our business can survive and grow regardless of difficulties we face (R11)”.

Collaboration can bridge information exchange in crucial decisions that will bring extensive and significant impacts. These task competencies are interrelated and mutually support each other (Roman et al., 2019). Good communication enhances collaboration during transformation preparation and planning in the pandemic situation. In contrast, on the other way around, well-communicated preparation and planning will foster collaboration with related parties so that the navigation process under difficult situations becomes easier to perform.

Adaptive Competencies

Leaders who make quick adaptations become one of the success factors in navigating the team through difficult situations. Humans generally tend to be resistant to change (Worley et al., 2020) and

use the same approach to deal with different problems. The adaptive skills of leaders in dealing with unusual situations are demonstrated by their ability to make immediate but on-target decisions while anticipating further effects and contingency plans in case of failure.

“We make some changes in our leadership to adapt to the situation. Quick adaptation should be made because we do not know how long this condition will last, and we cannot predict the effects if we make too late adjustments. (R2)”

The knowledge and experience determine the adaptive decision-making that individuals have passed.

“We use all of our experience and knowledge as reference material for adaptation to situations and problems during the pandemic.” (R12)

Knowledge and experience become referents for leaders to determine strategic steps and decisions. The lack of references to cope with the pandemic requires leaders to rely on thinking systems, reasoning, and Quick decisions and good analysis are the indicators of good adaptive governance (Janssen and van der Voort, 2020).

“The pandemic demands that all decisions be made in a fast time, but it is hoped that the impact will be minimal” (R9)

Adaptation differs from agility, although many researchers state that there is a similarity between adaptation and agility, that is, the time needed. Adaptation comes from the theory of evolution. The ability to adapt to the environment is one of the main requirements for survival. Theories of adaptive governance speak of “adjusting” to changes and new environments and “learning” as central to governance efforts (Janssen and van der Voort, 2020)

Virtual Competencies

Virtual leadership focuses on remote working patterns, working beyond the same geographic area

or at the same time. The main difference between virtual and conventional teams is the distance and the use of technology in interaction.

“Virtual leadership relies all leadership processes on technology. It provides numerous conveniences but also requires flexibility because we have to adjust many conventional activities so that they can be performed virtually (R7)”.

Video and audio technology provide flexibility for leaders and employees to interact anytime and anywhere. Fatigue and boredom from working at a separate distance become one issue for teams that work virtually. Leaders need to develop skills to facilitate virtual-based socialization among the team members so employees feel supported and are not left walking alone in their daily activities.

“Regular meetings and other activities such as in conventional working system were still performed even though they are moved to the virtual system. Such condi-

tions will promote strength and solidity despite without face-to-face interaction (R8)”.

Trust is one of the main pillars of remote or virtual work, where everything is done without direct supervision. Leaders can show trust through open and fair communication instead of close control and monitoring through acceptable mechanisms as a form of suspicion to employees.

“Leader trust affects the relationship between the leader and the team. Trust increases the team’s confidence to complete the task”. (R6)

The leader’s trust in the team and operational cohesion play an important role as mediators between team performance and leadership style (Ben Sedrine et al., 2021). The leader must show trust in the team without compromising the level of supervision. Trust is synonymous with unsupervised, but in a pandemic situation and the pattern of working remotely, trust must still be managed even without direct supervision.

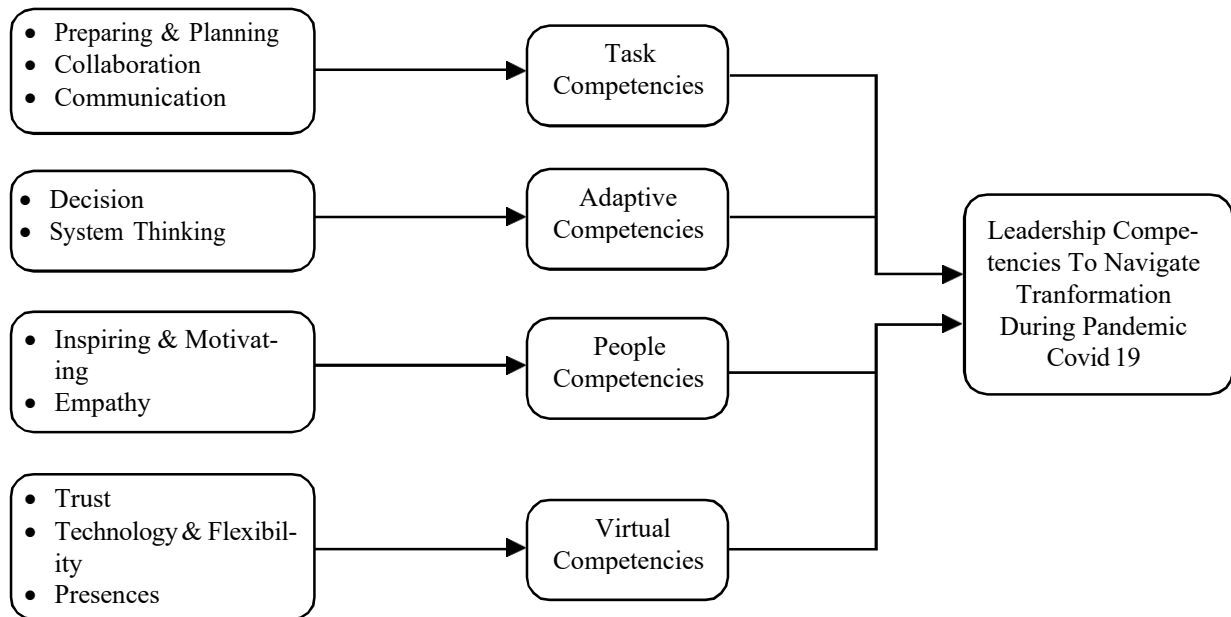


Figure 2. Crisis Leadership Competencies That Navigate Transformation During the Pandemic

CONCLUSIONS

Organizational transformation is at risk of failure, and its risk of failure is higher during the Covid-19 pandemic. This study found a set of competencies that the leaders demonstrated to deal with transformation amid the pandemic: task risks, human relations, adaptive, and virtual competencies. The task competencies include planning, implementation, and supervision in anticipating unprecedented situations. Human relation competencies are the ability to influence, inspire, and show empathy in a difficult and stressful situation. Adaptive competencies focus on making correct decisions according to the situation and condition using the thinking system. Virtual competencies involve the ability to practice virtual management using technology that allows flexibility, manage their presence even though they work from different places, and build a virtual-based trust culture without direct supervision.

IMPLICATIONS

The traits and behaviors of leaders identified in this study are a reference for leaders who transform amid the Covid-19 pandemic and practice remote working systems. Leaders with human relation competencies, task competencies, adaptation competencies, and virtual competencies are the ones that companies need during the pandemic.

LIMITATIONS

This research was conducted during the early days of the Covid-19 crisis when all employees worked remotely. All interviews were conducted via Zoom. There is a possibility of novelty bias that affects the informants' answers. The increasingly controlled Covid-19 and working remotely for a long period is carried out can affect participants' answers

RECOMMENDATIONS

This study focuses on the competencies of leaders in navigating transformation during the Covid-19 pandemic, implying the implementation of remote working to minimize viral transmission. Future studies need to explore post-pandemic leadership competencies that practice hybrid or a combination of

remote and face-to-face work. In the future, many organizations will adopt hybrid working; thus, leaders' competencies should adjust to this working practice. Therefore, deep and comprehensive studies are needed to enrich existing literature by combining leadership competencies both in the pandemic and post-pandemic.

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