(REVIEW ARTICLE)

Leadership style that is effective amidst a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

Crisis is a feature of human life and will pose difficulties for businesses and countries especially if they are unprepared. Covid-19 pandemic is one of such crises to have severe impact in recent times on economies and business and has thrown up leadership challenges. The objective of this article is to evaluate the leadership style that is effective amidst a crisis such as the covid-19 pandemic. The paper examined different leadership definitions, leadership theories and styles of leadership and explored the leadership style that is best for crisis situations. The best leadership in a crisis must be one that this is transformational, effective, and authentic. In uncertainty, there is a lack or shortage of knowledge and information concerning probabilities of future events that could affect a business organization. This paper has reviewed what a leader is, the different theories and styles of leadership, the path-goal, and examined the best leadership style and qualities of a leader that is best suited for crisis situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic. It is important that countries and organizations conduct more sensitization and training on the management of crisis and groom leaders that can manage crisis with the most effective style and method.

1. Introduction

A leader is an agent of change that influences and motivates people to effect change in society. Leaders exist in every level of an organization [1]. Leaders are the link between managers, management, and workers. Leadership is believed to be subject to strategic planning. It is found to be crucial in providing a prevalent direction and obligation [2].

Leaders are usually change agents in organizations, and they look at events in a wholesome manner, looking at the future and the present [3].

2. Leadership theories

Many theories of leadership have been put forward by different scholars and these include:

- The great man theory of leadership
- The trait theory of leadership
- Situational (contingency) theory of leadership
- Style and behaviour theory
- Process leader theory of leadership
- Transactional theory of leadership
- Transformational theory of leadership

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2.1. The Great man theory of leadership

This theory of leadership holds that some men and women are destined to be great and are born with that innate capacity. It propounds that those great men and women are the ones that determine the course of history and that great events cannot happen without a great, larger than life personality behind it. This theory was propounded by Thomas Carlyle in 1847 and he maintained that only those born with this innate heroic capacity can ever be leaders [4].

Recent disasters in leadership provided by supposed 'great men' such as Hitler, Mussolini etc have called this theory into question and hence new revisions to this theory posit that for great men to succeed they need to possess some traits to help them become great leaders [5].

2.2. The trait theory of leadership

This theory of leadership holds the view that certain traits possessed by people make them better leaders. These traits could be innate or acquired but are believed to help stand the individual that possesses them as a leader among peers.

These traits are certain physical traits and peculiar personality characteristics and helps to separate those who are leaders from those who are not leaders. These include characteristics such as height, charisma, intelligence, attractiveness, effectiveness etc [6]. The trait theory however could not pinpoint which of the characteristics and personality traits was the most effective for one to become a good or great leader hence it is criticised by some scholars as not being precise [7].

2.3. Situational (contingency) theories of leadership

This leadership theory notes that no one style of leadership can stand on its own and that the leadership style adopted in any circumstance is dependent on a lot of factors such as the situation of the followers, the quality of leadership needed and other variables. The leader adapts according to the situation at the time. Leadership style that could work in a situation may not work in another [8].

The style of leadership that a leader adopts is dependent on the exposure and the maturity of the followers [9].

2.4. Style and Behaviour theory

This theory postulates that an individual usually has a distinct style of leadership that they are comfortable with, and that one style is varied according to situations.

Yukl [10] discussed three different styles of leadership- democratic, autocratic and laissez faire and these are considered by individuals in different situations. Democratic leadership according to this author fits conditions where the followers have energy, enthusiasm and engagement with the leadership and themselves, autocratic leadership is suitable for situations where output or productivity need to be maximised and laissez faire leadership is suitable when the followership/workforce is made up of highly motivated and skilled persons who can take initiatives by themselves.

2.5. Process leader theory of leadership

The process leadership theory of leadership focuses on defining and explaining leadership roles in the context of servant leadership, learning organization leadership, principal centred leadership, charismatic leadership etc.

Servant leaders tend to focus on the problems and anxieties that their individual members face and seek to ameliorate this with focus on the well-being of the people being led. The servant leader behaves like a servant in the leadership role and seeks to satisfy the followership by bending to their needs and wants and trying to always fulfil these needs. When this is practised in large organizations, the chief executive becomes a steward of the vision and mission of the organization and its members [11].

2.6. Transactional theory of leadership

In the transactional form of leadership, there is a 'give and take' agreement between the leader and followers.

With this sort of leadership, there is a set of mutual agreements and decisions with benchmarks set between the leaders and the followers so that when goals are met or not met, there is commensurate reward or punishment [12].

Transactional leadership could be active or passive depending on when the leaders intervene. In active transactional leadership, the leaders intervene when things are about to go wrong while in passive transactional leadership, the leader applies the agreed punishment or reward at the end of an agreed period [13].

2.7. Transformational theory of leadership

In transformational leadership, the leader galvanises the followership to a common goal that transcends self. It is a form of leadership theory that aligns to a greater good as its guiding principle. The leader in this theory motivates and raises the morality of the led to achieve the common goal/objectives (House & Shamir, 1993). The transformational leader focuses on goals, dreams and ethics and has the capacity to discover the need for change and get the commitment and agreement of the followers to work towards this. Transformational leaders are visionary and seek to get the better nature of their followers to achieve the betterment of the greater good [5].

3. Different types of leadership styles

There are different leadership styles practised in organizations and nations and these are enumerated as below [14]:

- Autocratic leadership style where the leader dictates what happens from top to bottom of the organization
- Authoritative leadership style where the leaders give clear instructions on what is to be done and how it is to be done and takes time to explain to the followers the rationale of the orders given.
- Pacesetting leadership style where the leader is concerned more on the attainment of goals and increasing performance, expecting excellence from their subordinates and themselves.
- Democratic leadership style, where the leader allows the followers to take part in leadership processes, decision making and takes the final decision after allowing the followers participate in the process with due respect and rights accorded to them.
- Coaching leadership style where the leader serves as a guide to the followers, helping them to achieve stated aims and objectives
- Affiliative leadership style where the leader is a collaborator with the followers and is focused on forming cooperative relationships within and between teams, gaining loyalty and obtaining the required support to lead the followers.
- Laissez-faire leadership style is practiced with the leader exhibiting a hands-off approach to leadership, allowing the followers to do things in the organisation by their own initiatives while the leader assumes a more passive role.

4. The COVID-19 pandemic and leadership crisis

The Covid-19 pandemic was declared by the World Health organization (WHO) on the 11th day of March 2020. This heralded an era of severe challenges and disruptions for businesses, organizations and nations throughout the world and heralded an era of severe uncertainty [15].

Many nations around the world closed their borders and economies to contain the threats and effects of the pandemic and more than 80 countries around the world were affected by these [16].

The crisis caused by this unprecedented pandemic called for adequate leadership and quick adaptation of processes and routines to an ever-evolving situation. Many businesses and leadership had to be remodelled while keeping the health and safety of employees in mind and many leaders had to grapple with dealing with these challenges without any prior training of dealing with events of this magnitude or knowing which leadership to adopt [15].

5. Disruption in nations, businesses, and communities associated with COVID-19

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, many businesses had to close their doors with distortion and disruption in the economy of many countries as well as the many industries and economic sectors. There were widespread world-wide challenges in supply, manufacturing, distribution and retail of goods and services with issues with consumer demand, cashflow, sales and marketing, insurance etc. This forced many closures of companies and industries around the world with many industries unable to recover after the major waves of the pandemic had settled. This also created hiring freezes and furlough of many workers in different industries around the world. However, many other businesses

boomed during the pandemic such as online businesses, gaming apps, food retail industries etc, though many markets and businesses especially in the travel and tourism industry are now non-existent because of the pandemic [17].

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused stress, disorganizations, and disruptions to political, economic, religious, financial, social, and communal structures of the world that were available pre-pandemic [16].

6. Skills and traits essential for leaders during crisis

Leaders can be elevated or destroyed during a period of crisis. During the pandemic of Covid-19 notable leaders of business and nations and captains of industry have been able to provide the leadership required to navigate their constituents through the pandemic. Some of the traits noted to be essential for leadership to thrive in the pandemic include honesty, trustworthiness, clear and good communication, and capacity to look forward to better days even when things appear gloom.

Crisis shape leaders and organisations, and it is important to conduct After Action Reviews (AAR) after every major crisis which will serve as debrief of the event and help leaders and followers understand how the crisis was managed, gain learning points, and improve in subsequent challenges. Leaders must be able to do these and learn from it [18].

7. Effective leadership during uncertainty, the leader-follower-exchange theory, path-goal theory and the emergence of authentic leadership

The best leadership in a crisis must be one that this is transformational, effective, and authentic.

In uncertainty, there is a lack or shortage of knowledge and information concerning probabilities of future events that could affect a business organization [19]. Uncertainty is common in the era of globalization [20]. Due to uncertainty, expansion plans, internalisation and commitment to businesses could be affected [21].

Uncertainty differs from risk. Risk can be anticipated and can also be measured with probability while uncertainty is subjective and multidimensional and is hence more difficult to measure [22].

Factors that may contribute to uncertainty include upheavals in leadership, changes in markets, problems with the competition, poor planning, poor communication, and a poor unthinking culture. Uncertainty can affect the environment, the company, companies, industry, and economy and one of notable example is the uncertainty brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic [21].

To manage uncertainty adequately, there must be a reduction of the probability of undesirable outcomes happening [23]. This can be done with developing strategies that will styme or help the organization deal with the uncertainty [20]. For this to happen there must be appropriate behaviour or behaviour change as needed to tackle uncertainty, and this can be done though improving the sharing of information, more collaboration, networking and increasing flexibility, control, the imitation of the good things that the competitor is doing and avoidance of behaviours that would worsen the uncertainty [24]. Organizations faced with uncertainty need to adopt styles of leadership that can address this [25].

The relationship between the leader and those that are led is important in managing the organization day-to-day and more so in a pandemic/ crisis. This affects the performance of the team as a whole and the individuals within the team [26]. The path goal theory as determined by House [27] describes the effect of the leader's influence when the subordinates have barriers on their path to achieving the goals. A leader helps the followers to achieve the set goals by provision of support, removal of obstacles and motivation. This represents the path that countries and companies must thread to reach the new normal in the era of COVID-19 or in crisis.

The Leader-Member Exchange Theory (LMX) notes that the relationship between leaders and the people they lead is an interactive relationship that goes both ways, and this relationship has the capacity to affect the overall performance at work of both the leader and the followers [28]. The LMX theory shows how the relationships between leaders and their subordinates affects the attitude, cognition, behaviour, emotions, and performance of the team members, with a better relationship showing better output and positive indices though other factors also affect these [29].

For a leader to be effective, the person must have direction, purpose, and vision (Bromley & Kirschner, 2007). It is the responsibility of the leader to see to the development, transformation, sustenance, and communication of the vision [30]. In a crisis, a leader can become authentic by exhibiting honesty, concern and benevolence towards the people that

are led. This authenticity is important in non-crisis situations also and is a summative of ethical conduct in leadership [18].

8. Leadership and working with teams during a pandemic (uncertainty) compared to stable times

In a crisis, leadership of organizations must realise that stability will not come via a top to bottom approach. In normal everyday emergency, the command-and-control structure of the organization can be relied upon to deal with the challenges but in a situation of uncertainty, this approach will not work. This is because the problems that occur in uncertainty are poorly understood by the structure that exists in stable times [30].

Organisations will do better in uncertainty with a network of teams that have clear priorities, easily accessible and responsible to the transformational leader and are empowered to promote rapid problem solving and less bureaucracy.

Recommendation

Crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic are not routine occurrences but when they do occur can cause unimaginable pain and economic suffering, hence it is important that leaders in organisations and countries are trained on how to deal with these challenges. Through the examination of the different theories of leadership and various leadership styles, it is clear from literature that a lot of work must be done by organisations and countries to train and elevate the best kind of leadership that will be useful and effective in the navigation of the political, religious, business and corporate world post COVID-19 era.

9. Conclusion

This paper has reviewed what a leader is, the different theories and styles of leadership, the path-goal, and LMX theories of leadership and examined the best leadership style and qualities of a leader that is best suited for crisis situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is important that countries and organizations conduct more sensitization and training on the management of crisis and groom leaders that can manage crisis with the most effective style and method.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

The author declares no competing interest.

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