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**FEATURE**

**Application of Leadership Theories to Crisis Management  
in Institutions of Higher Learning: The Case  
of the COVID-19 Pandemic**

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**Abstract.** *The COVID-19 pandemic has seriously impacted individuals and organizations globally. It has significantly affected educational institutions. Institutions that had considered only traditional approaches to learning were left with little or no choice but to shift to virtual or online learning modality. Many educators and educational leaders were not prepared for the rapid change that the pandemic caused. The concept of virtual education or learning was not considered an effective substitute to traditional learning approaches by many institutions before the pandemic. Higher education institutions faced grave challenges in starting or continuing their courses of action. These challenges posed by the pandemic heavily impacted various spheres of the institutions, with much of the burden on teaching, learning, and finance. Institutions responded to the crisis in the most effective way they knew how. This paper analyzes theories and approaches that were applicable to the COVID-19 crisis management strategies in institutions of higher learning during the pandemic. It explores four critically interwoven leadership approaches inclusive of transformational, servant, adaptive, and team leadership, which were inarguably beneficial for both long- and short-term impacts on the advancement of higher education in an unstable environment like the one imposed by COVID-19.*

**Keywords:** leadership theories, leadership strategies, COVID-19, crisis management, institutions of higher learning, university, new normal.

## **Introduction**

Leadership is vital to an organization's overall well-being. Leaders and administrators seek and highly value this commodity and it is even deemed important to the improvement of their lives in a personal, social, and professional manner (Northouse, 2019). Leadership matters greatly in times of crisis, especially considering the abrupt change of situations. Leaders have the full responsibility of ensuring organizational change to respond to threatening situations, opportunities, or alterations in the environment. Leadership is needed to keep the organization afloat. While organizations cannot function without followers, they equally cannot function without leadership.

Articulating and carrying out the right vision is expected from all leaders. Proper implementation of leadership theories, approaches, and styles is highly beneficial to the entire organizational leadership, for they help to ensure that adequate guidance for organizational management during times of crisis can help maintain stability during the time of crisis. Leaders help people sense the need for change, accept, and act out a new way of getting the work done in organizations. Much of the guidance leaders need to affect change comes from leadership theories and approaches. Leadership theories are blueprints for developing strategies and ensuring pathways to effective leadership outcomes, including those used to address a crisis.

The COVID-19 pandemic ushered in a global crisis that impacted organizations and institutions the world over. The impact bore heavily on higher education institutions with resultant academic shifts to ensure and maintain stability. Effective crisis management leadership strategies were key players in ensuring institutional survival and stability. The purpose of this paper is to assess theories applicable to COVID-19 crisis management in institutions of higher learning. This paper uses selected leadership theories and approaches to assess strategies for effective crisis management during the pandemic. It is carefully based on the review of selected theories, including transformational leadership, servant leadership, adaptive leadership, and team leadership theories. The paper discusses the applicability of these theories to crisis management leadership strategies in the midst of the COVID-19 crisis in institutions of higher learning.

### **Effects of COVID-19 on Institutions of Higher Learning**

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought upon the world outnumbered devastating impacts that could be felt in every sector of operation, impacting individuals, leaders, educators, and institutions (Stasel, 2020). This has led to crises that could not go unnoticed. Institutions of higher learning have been gravely impacted, and they will probably never be the same even after the pandemic is over. The education sector is one of the most obstructed service sectors from the pandemic because of the rapid shutting down of academic activities in schools and universities and changes in learning activities; thus, disrupting the academic

calendar with resultant stress to students and parents (Izumi et al., 2020), educators, and educational leaders. Leadership in all spheres has been challenged.

The future of organizational leaders seems uncertain during this pandemic. Educators were compelled to shift overnight to online instructional delivery (Dahwan, 2020). The effect was most weighty for disciplines and instructors where in-class instruction took place using chalk and board for discussion and activities (Davis et al., 2020), and where educational technology is highly limited or inexistent. Izumi et al. (2020) state that “major challenges identified were the lack of adequate preparedness for the pandemic . . . change in the mode of teaching to online lectures and working from home” (p.1). These sudden changes affected everyone who was not ready for an online education modality. Other impacts bore heavily on business operations of private higher education institutions by decreasing their sources of income, reducing the productivity of employees, and limiting the institutional size to cover important costs such as salary (Woodwosen, 2021). Leaders sought to find out the most appropriate strategies to tackle the changes brought upon by COVID-19 (Uzun, 2020).

A number of leadership styles and techniques have been employed to control the crisis that COVID-19 imposed and to mitigate the impacts on individuals and institutions. Leaders have utilized adaptive leadership strategies which signaled hope and resilience amid stress (Stasel, 2020), responsive strategies with a focus on systemic interaction and collaboration; thus, maximizing efforts toward the achievement of a shared goal (O’Driscoll, 2020; Uzun, 2020), and a wide range of other leadership strategies. There are still a number of leadership strategies for the future that are yet to be examined and strategies that work best in a crisis like COVID-19 are yet to be determined.

### **Reflection on Selected Leadership Theories**

Theories guide the practice of leadership. Certain theories and approaches help explain how complex the leadership process is (Northouse, 2019). Theories inform leadership practice (Northouse, 2019). This paper specifically discusses four selected leadership theories that were considered relevant to addressing the pandemic crisis in the higher education context. These include transformational leadership, servant leadership, adaptive leadership, and team leadership. These four theories were selected because they complement one another when it comes to crisis management. Peculiarly, a state of crisis requires the morale, inspiration, and empowerment that transformational leadership provides. Additionally, it requires the leader’s attentiveness to the voices and needs of the followers—provided by servant leadership; not leadership that simply dictates what employees must do without thinking. Further, crisis management requires the leader to adapt to the new or changing context, using some skills and strategies that may not be necessary for regular day-to-day leadership. Last, because a crisis requires different teams to be put in place and work efficiently to resolve the crisis effectively and

efficiently, the leader must exert successful team leadership in crisis management. The combination of these four leadership theories is proposed in this paper as a great potential for addressing crisis effectively, as evidenced during the COVID-19 pandemic. All these four theories became important and evident in the handling of COVID-19.

### **Transformation Leadership**

Leadership that takes on acts of transformation is one that considers an extraordinary mode of influence that propels followers to perform beyond expectation (Northouse, 2019). Cavazotte et al. (2012) state that “transformational leaders are described as models for conduct and as being able to articulate a new and stimulating vision in their followers . . . they raise morale, inspire followers, and motivate them toward greater achievements or conquests” (p. 444). Leadership factors considered in the transformative process include the leader’s ability to serve as a powerful role model, inspire followers by motivating them, stimulate followers for innovation and ingenuity, and listen to and be very supportive of the followers (Northouse, 2019). Obviously, this type of leadership would benefit the handling of a crisis as complex as the current pandemic.

A study investigating how identification, engagement, and proactive personality impacts transformational leadership and employee performance found that both identification and engagement completely facilitate the relationship between a leadership that transforms and citizenship behavior within the organization (Buil et al., 2018). This signals that identification that leans toward individualized consideration and engagement similar to intellectual stimulation is vital for good citizenship behavior in organizations where transformational leadership is used. Jesus Christ applied this same approach. From the call of the 12 disciples to the Great Commission, His work and words showed a leadership-training program designed to equip those who would equip others for the kingdom of God (Howell, 2003). This leadership approach is very beneficial for effecting change in times of crisis. It becomes even more impactful when it is geared towards driving the vision for adaptation to transformational leadership, and change processes that result.

Transformational leadership considers four factors from the transformational leadership model ideal for a crisis like the one posed by COVID-19. On idealized influence, crisis and change processes require leaders who are positive influencers. COVID-19 pandemic brought upon the collegiate community abrupt shifts and changes, and faculty, students, and staff required leaders with compelling visions to identify with and emulate. On inspirational motivation, faculty and students faced the harsh realities of transitioning to online learning, which had to be enforced and inspired by leaders. On intellectual stimulation, as faculty and students face many adaptive challenges, they had to be stimulated for creativity and work out modalities for success in the learning environment. On individualized

consideration, faculty and students need to be nurtured for adaptation to the changing realities in order to fully understand the complexities of the COVID-19 shift in institutions of higher learning (IHL). Transformational leaders will provide this nurturing and support.

### **Servant Leadership**

Servant leadership stems from acts of genuine and authentic service to the ones being led. It carefully considers the leaders' character and intent toward serving others. Howell (2003) states that the "identity of all servant leaders [includes] character, motive, and agenda" (p. 296). The steadfastness of Joseph, Moses, Joshua, and Daniel in the Bible speaks to the character of servant leaders. David's protection of God's honor against the abuses of Goliath, the Philistine giant, speaks to the motive of that servant leader (Howell, 2003). Servant leaders pursue agendas in connection with the overall organizational mission. This identity of the servant leader, for sure, continues to be seen in effective leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Servant leadership places a strong emphasis on the leader's attentiveness to the concerns of the followers. It requires the leader's ability to identify with, nurture, and empower followers and develop their full individual capacities (Northouse, 2019). Servant leaders see themselves as caretakers of the organizations that strive to multiply the resources entrusted to them (Eva et al., 2019). Servant leadership is not self-seeking, nor does it yearn for recognition for work accomplished. Great leaders focus on building great organizations rather than establishing goals and then rallying their organizations to reach them at all costs (Blackaby & Blackby, 2011). Spiritual leaders long for the divine approval of stewardship well fulfilled: "Well done, good and faithful servant" (Howell, 2003). Servant leadership is very critical in times of crisis for it demonstrates the proven character and genuine motive of leaders that enable them to have a compelling vision and strive for genuine acts of service to their followers while unselfishly meeting the mission goals of the organization. Jesus had a mission for the salvation of humanity and He pursued it unselfishly. The same focus is expected from any servant leader, and even more so to address the leadership challenge of the COVID-19 crisis, including leadership in institutions of higher learning.

The behavior attribute of the servant leadership model by Liden et al. (2013) has been considered for the COVID-19 crisis in IHEs. The leadership behavior of conceptualizing goes with addressing the impact of COVID-19 per organizational goals of maintaining higher standards in IHEs. Emotional healing speaks to the leader providing support and standing by faculty and students in the wake of their adaptive challenges resulting from the crisis. Leaders also put their issues aside to help faculty and students manage technical challenges resulting from the shift to online learning. Training for online learning was a sure way of helping faculty and students succeed during the crisis. The crisis brought on a range of challenges and

perplexities, but the leaders' ability to keep the vision afloat and maintain IHE standards speak of their ethical behavior. Faculty were also empowered against acceptable standards to decide on the best mode of communication for their students. To create value for the community, leaders ensured much awareness, distributed masks and hand sanitizers, and advocated for vaccines to students, faculty, and the larger community.

### **Adaptive Leadership**

Adaptive leadership is borne out of change and challenges. Northouse (2019) asserts that adaptive leadership concentrates on what is required of individuals to adapt with regard to altering situations. All through Jesus' days on earth, He prepared and encouraged his disciples to adapt to the changing realities around them. He prepared the fishermen to adapt to the changing reality of catching men. Adaptive leaders make people ready and persuade people to deal with changing situations successfully (Howell, 2003).

Adaptive leadership is not void of complexities. The adaptive process is one in which identities and interactions between leaders and followers come together to form group structures (DeRue, 2011). They shift further (DeRue, 2011) from a central point to shared dynamics of leading and following and can progress in ways that permit groups to adjust and keep going during changing situations. Such practices have been seen in institutions of higher learning as leaders try to develop innovative solutions to the complex issues caused by the pandemic.

One of the biggest challenges faced by leaders today is the need to strategize and enable people and organizations to adapt in the wake of increasingly tough and dynamic environments (Uhl-Bien et al., 2018). The COVID-19 crisis brought on such a complex leadership challenge. This challenge still lingers in many organizations around the world. Adaptive leadership has a systemic process and psychotherapeutic nature, enabling leaders to work on ensuring followers' adaptation to challenging situations (Northouse, 2019). This approach is suitable for crises as it enables organizational members to remain hopeful and keep afloat. Such a focused and hopeful leadership approach was and is needed in the leadership of institutions of higher learning as leaders continue to adapt to the new normal.

The adaptive leadership model effectively addresses situational concerns brought on by the pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic in institutions of higher education took on a major shift from traditional learning to online learning, and leaders had to address a wide range of challenges. Instructors had to let go of their long use of chalk and whiteboards and acquaint themselves with the use of computers, other gadgets, and the internet for classroom instruction. Leaders had to create avenues for addressing these technical challenges. With the imminent change brought on by the pandemic, leaders in IHEs had to ensure training for online learning for faculty. Still, the acceptance by the faculty, as an adaptive

challenge, for the implementation of the process for the adaptive work resided solely with the faculty. The beliefs and values of faculty and students were threatened by the shift to online learning and many other factors, including the lockdown. Still, leaders encouraged and mobilized faculty and students to address concerns and ensure coping strategies to face the complexities of their concerns.

In addition to addressing the technical and adaptive challenges above, leaders assessed IHE policies and requirements like lockdowns, social distancing, and impacts on the budget, faculty teaching, student learning, and the entire goal of higher education. Leaders set clear operational policies and rules, and Zoom platforms became the means of expressing concerns for decision making, managing conflicts, and creating stability. Leaders were sensitive to faculty and students' plight as they also worked to ensure a focus on the hard work of transitioning to online learning. Leaders also empowered the faculty to take care of many student concerns, which was seen to increase their value in the process. Finally, the crisis's impact on IHEs was not void of dissent, but the inclusion of their ideas and concerns became a means of ensuring a means around this situational challenge brought on by COVID-19 and adapting to the new normal.

### **Team Leadership**

Team-based leadership is a sure way of ensuring that organizations maintain a competitive advantage by responding quickly and adapting to changes in the work environment (Northouse, 2019). The disciples were challenged by the scenes of Calvary and the ascension of their Lord. However, with the team spirit employed, they became rejuvenated for the cause of the Great Commission through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. This was evidenced on the day of Pentecost and the works that followed in the formation of the early Christian church. In the team approach, leadership is distributed and shared. Findings from a case study on effective leadership practices for institutes in challenging city settings show that increasing teachers' role in the life of the institution and their participation in decision making was an effective method to school management by the head teacher and was described as "sharing the leadership" (Madalinska-Michalak, 2014). Without the capable efforts of others, leaders cannot accomplish many important tasks (Blackaby & Blackaby, 2011).

Teaming is also essential for crisis management. The rudimentary undertaking of the crisis management team is to plan for probable crises and manage adequately the ones that ultimately occur. With teams, there is greater productivity and resources are used effectively (Northouse, 2019). Team leadership also births better decisions and ensures that problems are solved satisfyingly. It also ensures that valuable services are rendered, and the production of goods and services are of enhanced quality. When members of an organization work effectively in teams, there is heightened innovation and creativity (Northouse, 2019). This is exactly what was needed in institutions of higher learning to transition from traditional

teaching to emergency remote teaching and learning, a phenomenon that suddenly developed all over the world.

The hill model for team leadership considers the leaders' decisions, internal leadership actions that are task- and relationship-oriented, and environmental factors for team effectiveness. Success in IHEs during the COVID-19 crisis did not occur in a vacuum. It took on the efforts of the leader and a strong team. The goal of transitioning to online learning could not have been achieved without opening avenues for decision making, training in online modalities, and maintenance of IHE standards brought on by team members. In one IHE, more teaming ensued at the departmental levels as those who had attained mastery from the training began to coach and collaborate with other deficient faculty members in an effort to build stronger teams for student success. Another teaming decision ensued when the goal of increasing the financial base from student fees was set. A decision was reached by consensus to face the consequences of dealing with "change of grade issues" as a result of withholding grades for the many students who had financial obligations. This decision really paid off as salaries were managed during the crisis and at a time when salaries were needed the most.

### **Application of Leadership Theories to COVID-19 Crisis Management**

Educational leaders were challenged to respond to the COVID-19 crisis situation in the most effective manner possible or face failure in their quest for institutional advancement. Institutional challenges posed by the pandemic ranged from shifts in teaching and learning, frustrated traditional educators, students, and families, and the dwindling of income sources for institutional functions. In his study titled, "How Much Has COVID Cost Colleges?" Friga (2020) stated that

higher education is hurting . . . our entire operating model is under siege, the revenue losses are unprecedented, and campus leaders are beginning to respond to the historic challenges . . . they are realizing that cost cutting alone is not the answer, and that this is a time to clarify their institution's unique value to their students and communities. (p. 1)

This statement signals that leadership necessitated change amidst the crisis and adaption to the changing realities of the COVID-19 context. This idea leans toward transformational and adaptive leadership. The clarification of institutional values to students and communities indicates the leaders' character and motive of service and vision to these populations. Servant leadership is borne out of this strategy as it seeks to incorporate students for the benefits of the institutional service. Another useful leadership strategy was working together with the inclusion of institutions and governments, board of directors, managers, and academic lecturers and staff members—for successful transformation in higher education (Friga, 2020). Team leadership is seen here as effective for transformation and for addressing many



challenges that leaders faced and continue to face in higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The shift in teaching and learning from traditional to online or hybrid brought upon institutional management a myriad of complex challenges that generated many coping strategies that would open avenues for developing future education strategies in academic institutions. Education and research strategies outlined for environmental science studies in an institution of higher education or virtual classrooms seemed distant due to institutions' ability to offer more progressive and flexible services (Sapkota & Rijal, 2020). The challenges of COVID-19 in institutions of higher learning have led, for instance, to the invention and use of virtual and online data collection methods and analysis, and virtual and online classes are now among the most commonly used strategies for teaching and learning (Sapkota et al., 2020). These strategies are seen through the lenses of transformational and adaptive leadership as these are change strategies that gave a sense of adaptation to the COVID-19 situation.

Other innovative strategies include, but are not limited to, a collaboration between institutions of higher learning and the government or other organizations for academic and government partnerships, resource management, and availability or provision of e-resources to students enabled by faculty and staff, as well as capacity building for faculty and staff in new ideas and skills (Sapkota & Rijal 2020). These strategies are borne from the transformational leadership angle. They are connected to the positive effect of team leadership through collaboration with the government and other stakeholders. Additionally, they are related to servant leadership with consideration of building the capacities of faculty and staff and adaptive leadership in the fact that they lead to everyone's transformation.

The COVID-19 crisis also brought many high levels of acculturative and financial stress upon leaders and educators. Educators and leaders at international schools in different parts of the world experienced high-stress levels in relation to acculturation. However, with the application of a clear wisdom-pact adaptive leadership model in one of the education hub organizations that enabled educators and leaders to adapt to the crisis, the presence of hope, compassionate behavior, and resilience were evident (Stasel, 2020) and were contributing factors to positive crisis management. Adaptive leadership is vital for crisis management of this nature, for, through it, the impact for transformation is sustained.

The leadership theories explored here were and continue to be essential in COVID-19 crisis management in institutions of higher learning. Transformational leadership is needed for organizational change strategies that would propel followers to embrace productively the changing dynamics of the educational environment. Servant leadership took on the aspect of having authentic characters and motives for staff and faculty exposure to the new normal and further advancement in remote teaching and learning practices. The team approach gave rise to collaboration like academic-governmental partnerships that would not have

otherwise happened without the crisis. Adaptive leadership brought in an exciting dimension where it is seen as a priority approach for a crisis like COVID-19 in educational institutions, for without strategies for crisis adaption as in this pandemic, other leadership strategies might prove futile as they are all critically interwoven. Adaptation is very vital for the sustenance of transformational impacts in organizations. Leaders should therefore prioritize clear visionary adaptational plans for a crisis of this nature.

### **Conclusion**

The COVID-19 crisis wreaked havoc in every sector of the globe, including health, industry, social systems, and education (Chaney, 2020). Every sector still faces devastation, and the hope due to the availability of the COVID-19 vaccine is beginning to dwindle due to the discovery of different variants. Bringing an end to this menace in the wake of these uncertainties seems farfetched. Leadership theories and strategies that work best in crises are needed now more than ever. Futuristic approaches for effective crisis management and organizational sustenance are even more important.

The benefits of the leadership theories explored in this paper cannot be overemphasized for a crisis like COVID-19. Organizational leaders need not be equipped and determined to manage the crisis well. Strategizing with the most effective leadership strategies for organizational advancement is of utmost importance. The need for leaders who are innovative change-makers, adaptable, result-driven, selfless, with great motives for organizational change and advancement cannot be more stressed than it already has been. Organizational leadership that uses effective strategies for crisis management and is able to adapt to the changing dynamics of the environment in order to remain afloat is required for a time of crisis like this.

Leadership in the time of COVID-19 made it clear that no one knows everything and that we all depend on one another (servant leadership); therefore, while the leader had to provide the vision, he or she could not articulate an effective vision without collaborating with the followers. Followers could not help with and support the vision without having their voices heard, and their needs met. The uncertainty of the pandemic and therefore of any crisis requires that the leader be humble and collaborate much more with the followers.

COVID-19 has taught that the leader and the followers must adapt to the new reality. No one can lead or continue working the way they work when there is no crisis. Crisis calls for leaders to implement the best practices of adaptive leadership. In a time of crisis, it is not business as usual. New ideas and strategies must be innovated, tested, and implemented. Different members of the organization must learn to take on new roles. Everyone must be involved in innovative ways.

Another lesson learned from leadership during COVID-19 is that crisis provides an opportunity for the transformation of everyone in the organization. The *December 2021, Vol. 24, No. 2*

kind of transformation expected in effective crisis management is the kind that leads to positive change. The leader must be intentional in keeping the employees and the organization in a positive direction. It is true that survival during a crisis is a priority. However, transformational leaders use this opportunity to prepare the organization, the system, and the employees for a brighter future after the end of the crisis. Transformational leadership cannot be content with just surviving and going back simply to normal. It pushes for brighter normal in the future.

As the saying goes, no one is an island. COVID-19 provided that, indeed, two heads are better than one. Because of the uncertainty in which the pandemic plunged the world, no one was well prepared to face its challenges. All leaders of all sectors found themselves in uncharted territories. For this, team leadership skills were necessary to address different challenges of different departments simultaneously. Forming effective teams, each with a specific task and goals, is an effective way to handle a crisis. One person or a handful of people may not be enough to deal with a crisis effectively.

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