Crisis Leadership and Leadership Styles: Before, During and After

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Summary (137 words)

Although leadership is a well-studied phenomenon, it is yet to be fully understood (Burns, 1996, Harrison, 2018). This perhaps drives the need for further studies into the leadership discourse especially as the phenomenon keeps evolving. Recent events in the world brought about by the outbreak of COVID-19 has put leadership, particularly crisis leadership under scrutiny. This study examined what crisis and leadership are independently and further explored crisis leadership as a phenomenon. More interestingly in this paper is the assessment of leadership styles as they pertain to crisis in three phases- before, during and after as well as the leadership style that is most effective in times of crisis. The researcher aims to develop this study into a model that will provide an understanding of the phases of crisis and the leadership expectation of each phase.

Word count: 1980 words (excluding summary, references and table)
Introduction

The need to pay closer attention to leadership especially in times of crisis increased significantly with the outbreak of the Coronavirus, a pandemic that ravaged the world, crippled economies and claimed lives. The pandemic situation has created a novel type of crisis with high level of uncertainties (Smithson, 2021). Governments across nations and leaders of corporate organisations both private and public have had to adjust policies and make strong and timely decisions. Leaders during times of crisis are more than ever looked up to for answers and meaning to the rising uncertainties (Hungerford & Cleary, 2021). Due to the novelty of the COVID-19 crisis which first started out as a public health crisis, leaders were unsure whether to replicate lessons and transfer policies from previous crisis to the situation. This is understandable as lesson-drawing and policy transfer in normal routine situations is different when the situation is filled with threats, uncertainty, and urgency such as that of the Coronavirus (Powell & King-Hill, 2020). Balasubramanian & Fernandes (2022) argued that no training or experiences from previous crises could have prepared leaders for the COVID-19 crisis. Many leaders successfully managed the crisis while others faltered under pressure which led to temporary and in some, the permanent closure of businesses (Balasubramanian & Fernandes, 2022).

There is limited literature in crisis leadership especially those focused on the pandemic. However, the gap in knowledge has created the need to carry out this study and review existing literature across the field of leadership and leadership theoretical approaches in times of crisis that are most effective before, during and after the crisis (Weiss, 2002; Prewitt, Weil & Mclure, 2011). The paper also aims to discover if there are leadership behaviours best suited to handle crisis especially one that lingers such as the pandemic.

Crisis, Leadership and Crisis Leadership

Crisis has been defined by several scholars, but James and Wooten (2011) simply put it as a rare and extreme high impact event. More definitions of crisis can be found in table 1. Crisis could be untimely but can be predictable, nevertheless, it inevitably disrupts and comes with great consequences (Heath & Millar, 2004; Mitroff, 2001). Crisis is inevitable, it is almost a common part of everyday life. It will happen within small social units such as the family probably through a health or financial crisis. It could happen in our place of worship, at work, even politically or economically through our nation (Burns, 1996). When crisis happen, it puts a heavy weight on leadership as it demands rapid response within a limited time frame mostly with little or no information (Stern, 2013).

Leadership has also been extensively defined by many scholars. Harrison (2018) simply defined it as “a process of influence”. Likewise, Northouse (2021) defines leadership as a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal. More definitions of the phenomenon through different scholars were explored by Harrison (2018). Despite the rich array of definitions of leadership, leadership still arguably remains one of the most observed phenomena, but it is still to be fully understood (Burns, 1996; Harrison, 2018).

Often, followers do not know what exactly to demand and expect from leaders. Sometimes, followers would demand too much or too little. Burns (1996) reiterated this when he argued that “followers including observers and the media lack the appropriate standard for evaluating leaders,” (pg. 10). Boin, Kuipers & Overdijk (2013) examined how leadership performance can be assessed, what to reasonably expect from leaders and how important a leader’s role is as a crisis manager. These researchers came up with an assessment framework that demonstrates that some factors
such as size and behaviour of other actors which is out of the leader’s control could affect the outcome of a crisis.

Further to the study of leadership is the examination of crisis leadership which is particularly relevant to this paper. DuBrin (2013) defines it as “an act of leading members through a sudden and largely unanticipated, intensely negative, and emotionally draining circumstances” (pg. 3). Researchers have investigated what it entails, leadership style(s) that work more effectively in crisis situations, and how to make the most of it (Weiss, 2002; Stern, 2013; Jaques, 2012; Prewitt, Weil & Mclure, 2011).

Succeeding in crisis leadership has been largely attributed to the ability to make quick decisions and having a strong understanding of the situation. Weiss (2002) is of the notion that leaders are paid to think, the more time they spend thinking about a crisis before and during its occurrence, the better their chances of conceptualizing a strategic plan and holding steady to it. Decision making in the period of crisis unfortunately is not the easiest task to perform as it needs to be done in a timely manner under difficult circumstances (Stern, 2013).

Balasubramanian & Fernandes (2022) in a more recent study created a model. As dreadful as crises are, they remain opportunities for organisations to adopt change and revitalise as crisis brings to a leader’s attention issues that have been neglected and presents an opportunity for innovation and system improvements (James and Wooten, 2011; Prewitt, Weil & Mclure, 2011; Brumfield, 2012). Crisis leadership according to James and Wooten (2011), requires a different set of skills. These skills might not entirely be unique to crisis leadership. Indeed, some of these set of skills may overlap with general leadership skills. It is therefore important to explore the phases of crisis and what they require.

**Phases of Crisis: Before, During and After**

Crisis comes in three phases, the *before* which is known as the Preparatory phase, *during* also known as Emergency phase and *after* which is considered the Adaptive phase (Weiss, 2002; Prewitt, Weil & Mclure, 2011). All crises go through these phases. Prior to crisis, every organisation is in the preparatory phase. Prewitt, Weil & Mclure (2011) suggest that all organisations at this phase should take note of warning signs of crisis. Some scholars are of the notion that crisis does not just happen, there are always warning signs (Mitroff, 2001).

The *emergency phase* is the phase where crisis erupts. More than any other phase, this is where leadership is put to the utmost test. Prewitt, Weil & Mclure (2011) claim that a leader at this phase must not be overcome by the urgency of the crisis. Instead, “the leader must step back and draw from the guiding principles of the organisation,” (Prewitt, Weil & Mclure, 2011, pg. 63). When a leader knows the genesis of a crisis and every other part involved, he or she is equipped to make sound decisions and relay to the public and his or her subordinates the situation of things.

The *adaptive phase* begins when the organisation returns to a sense of stability. The leader has an opportunity during this phase to change and grow, develop new procedures, alter the organisational culture, and help the organization to profit from the crisis, (Prewitt, Weil & Mclure, 2011). Learning from the crisis helps a leader ensure that the crisis is not repeated.

Each phase of crisis seems to come with its own peculiarities. It suggests the question of whether one leadership style suits all phases or different leadership styles should be adopted. The contingency theory of leadership seems to answer this question as leadership sometimes may need to be adjusted to fit the situation at each point in time. Furthermore, Warrick’s (1981) work when he
examined the Blake and Mouton Management Grid helps us to understand the integration of the style and contingency theories of leadership such that a leader can switch and choose which philosophy of leadership works on each situation while maintaining their style of leadership. This gives support to Hungerford & Cleary’s (2021) study that all leadership styles can be applied during crisis situations to achieve positive outcome.

Furthermore, Du Plessis and Keyter (2020) and Hartney et al (2021) suggested that the adaptive leadership approach should be adopted in times of crisis. This approach “embraces the strengths of leadership approaches borrowed from transformational, transactional, autocratic, democratic, and servant leadership models.” (Du Pleiss & Keyter, 2020, pg. 71).

**Leadership Styles**

Harrison (2018) conducted a study on some emerging paradigms in the study of leadership theories and styles. However, a more recent input in this area would be that of Northouse (2021) as he gave a more robust account of several leadership theories, comparing and contracting them while focusing on how theories can inform practice. The style approach focuses on the behavioural aspect of leadership. To achieve the aim of this paper, it is important to look at what some scholars have done in terms of leadership styles and behaviours that work in times of crisis.

Hasan and Rjoub (2017) examined three leadership styles- transformational, transactional, and charismatic leadership styles and their relationship to crisis management by conducting a survey through 680 completed questionnaires at the Ministry of Planning in Erbil, Iraq. Their findings and analysis show that charismatic leadership had the highest value. Some researchers believe that no one individual leadership style fit all organisation contexts or situation especially in crisis (Alkarabsheh, Ahmed & Kharabsleh, 2013). Hungerford & Cleary (2021) also concluded that practically all leadership styles can be applied during crisis situations to achieve positive outcome when they conducted a study of leadership styles that can be employed during a crisis and how followers who are experiencing challenging times due to a crisis can be supported.

Similarly, McNulty, Marcus and Henderson (2019) argued that the fundamental building blocks of effective everyday leadership and crisis leadership are similar. This shows that leaders and organizations “can seize the opportunity of crisis to hone the critical everyday capabilities while building the capacity to become resilient during crisis and change” (pg, 6). de Bussy & Paterson (2012) conducted a study using qualitative and quantitative research methodology of content analysis of twitter messages to compare two leaders with two distinct leadership styles—transformational and transactional leadership during the Queensland flood in Australia. The researchers found that transformational style of leadership is highly effective in a crisis. Similar to this finding, Mashele and Alagidede (2020) concluded that transformational leadership style is highly effective in times of crisis when they conducted a study on women in senior leadership positions in corporate South Africa during times of crisis.

Obviously, there is no consensus in the leadership behaviour or theory that works more effectively in times of crisis. All leadership styles seem to be useful and effective depending on how a leader approaches the crisis, while some styles also seem to be more effective in some situations than others. This leaves a gap in the study of leadership as to how leadership in times of crisis can be approached universally because for one reason or another, these studies examined cannot be generalisable.
Conclusion

There are still a lot of questions left unanswered and an obvious gap in knowledge as there is a lack of representation in literature covering crisis leadership in the global south. Empirical research will be conducted to develop this study and answer research questions such as the skills and behaviour required of a leader in times of crisis especially in the global south. Ultimately, the question of what leadership style works most effectively before, during and after a crisis will be further investigated. The next phase of this study will be to conduct a qualitative study through in-depth interviews with leaders at the Local Government level of the Lagos State Public Service in Nigeria - chairmen, and heads of departments. These samples will be randomly selected through a purposive sampling technique. Lagos State Government was chosen because it is an understudied terrain. The research aims to find out how a fast-growing city with almost 22 million people managed the COVID-19 pandemic at the grassroot level in terms of handling all the tasks of crisis leadership (Stern, 2013), especially as it relates to decision making and terminating the crisis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Definitions of Crisis</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>S/N</td>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Shaluf et al (2003)</td>
<td>An abnormal situation which presents some extraordinary, high risk to business and which will develop into a disaster unless carefully managed</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>James and Wooten (2011)</td>
<td>Rare and extreme high-impact events</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Millar and Heath (2003)</td>
<td>A crisis is typically defined as an untimely but predictable event that has actual or potential consequences for stakeholders’ interests as well as the reputation of the organization suffering the crisis</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Coombs (2010)</td>
<td>The perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organization’s performance and generate negative outcomes</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>Rosenthal, et al (1989)</td>
<td>A serious threat to the basic structures or the fundamental values and norms of a system, which under time pressure and highly uncertain circumstances necessitates making critical decisions.</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>James and Wooten (2004)</td>
<td>Any emotionally charged situation that, once it becomes public, invites negative stakeholder reaction and thereby has potential to threaten the financial wellbeing, reputation, or survival of the firm or some portion thereof.</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Prewitt, Weil and McIure (2011)</td>
<td>An unexpected, dramatic, and unprecedented event that forces an organization into chaos and may</td>
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</table>

**References**


