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Role of Strategic Leaders in Unexpected Healthcare Crisis Management

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aims to explore the roles of strategic leaders in business concerns and how they maintain sustainability in business during an unexpected crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic. The present study investigated the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis on the healthcare industry, organizational performance, and various leadership strategies to overcome such a crisis.

Methods: Hospital leaders frequently face new challenges, especially in a healthcare crisis like a pandemic, which may be beyond the scope of the current leadership practices. Additional unavoidable responsibilities may arise, affecting employees' productivity, emotions, adaptability, and leadership styles in a crisis.

Result: Transformational leadership is identified as suitable for leaders in a crisis to motivate employees and introduce rapid changes to maintain sustainability. Employee engagement, motivation, innovation, creativity, and many more are critical for a business's survival in a crisis. Transformational leaders are active and utilize different tactics to formulate and implement decisions, provide motivation, promote innovation, display the significance of supporting the organization, and strengthen employee engagement.

Conclusion: Influential leaders have roles ranging from routine management activities to handling extra-work roles such as strategy formulation, technology expert, coach, mentor, entrepreneur, etc. Swift changes in leadership styles are necessary to accommodate such rapid changes brought by crises in the healthcare sector for work situations.

Keywords: Strategic leadership, healthcare, Crisis management, COVID-19 pandemic

Introduction

The United States (U.S.) healthcare system is challenged when addressing a novel coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) that caused significant illness and death, crippled healthcare capabilities, and overwhelmed medical resources⁽¹⁾. The crisis raised numerous unique questions about the healthcare system in the country, the population, and the world⁽²⁾. The U.S. healthcare is a profit-based system that depends on elective specialized surgeries with brief hospital stays. Many hospitals reported issues related to fast patient turnaround, a few vacant beds and ventilators, and a shortage of personal protective equipment (PPE) during the pandemic crisis. The highly infectious nature of the novel pandemic spreads quickly through the continents, and it has significantly impacted the security and operational capabilities of the nation; the healthcare system needs to address all these issues effectively to manage the current pandemic crisis⁽³⁾. The disease raised multiple complex problems in the healthcare field, creating a resource-limited environment, such as the lack of PPE, medications, ventilators, and control of the disease spread with economic impacts. The current pandemic leaves healthcare with considerable ambiguity due to the lack of prior experience with the disease and a lack of available testing and treatment options.

The present pandemic crisis proved challenging for almost all leaders worldwide; some are successfully managed, but others are not due to the crisis pressure. True leaders are self-motivators who continuously encourage employees to improve their performance to overcome such a crisis as a pandemic. Good leaders always ensure high team performance by various methods and satisfy customer expectations by building effective teams and fostering a digital culture⁽⁴⁾. A leader's identity is a part of regular work identity; however, a pandemic crisis increases responsibilities to carry out extra roles such as a strategist, entrepreneur, coach, technology expert, mentor, and team member. Institutions should develop leadership programs to train employees to bring them to leadership positions and to strengthen leader identities, enabling them to prepare for crisis management⁽⁵⁾. The research objective is to find the roles of strategic leaders and what they do in a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic. The present study investigates the impact of the pandemic crisis on leadership strategies, emotions, organizational performance, and business productivity. The leaders from the community, national, and international levels are required to respond to a crisis quickly, a constantly changing environment is challenging, and

leadership's active involvement is vital to overcome a crisis. Healthcare leaders are responsible for successfully facing the effects of any healthcare-related emergencies and maintaining hospital clinical operations by resolving many ongoing issues. Hospital leaders must address many practical challenges involved in the scenario, such as staffing, resource access, communications, etc., and provide seamless support to patients and staff to surpass anxiety, stress, and burnout. The challenges can be related to clinical, financial, administration, staffing, operational, and many more, depending on the crises that often emerge rapidly and unpredictably. The common challenges in healthcare during a disaster include patient surges in hospitals, lack of information, scarcity of supplies, emotional turmoil, changes in scheduling, and the need for future risk mitigation. Many healthcare disasters continue to unfold over long periods and are not always resolved quickly. As a result, hospital leaders have significant roles in unexpected healthcare crises and must always prepare for new challenges as they arise and continue adapting strategies as needed.

Material and Methods

This study does not involve patients, so institutional review board (IRB) approval is not required. In an exceptionally private healthcare business, significant decisions are made by senior management; they develop the organization's mission, vision, and values and formulate appropriate decision-making procedures to implement strategies. Good leadership is a foremost requirement in a crisis than ever before since the damage is inflicting any business on a massive scale. The pandemic created chaos in many areas, including healthcare and the global share market, that increased unemployment and loss of income. An excellent leader continuously motivates team members, especially in a crisis, and improves employee flexibility, work performance, and productivity⁽⁶⁾. They also provide regular briefings to reinforce motivation and enhance employees' agility to face crises successfully. Leadership has a significant role in developing the performance of employees and the organization, introducing systems for changing circumstances, adapting leadership styles, and managing workforces. The primary intent of these changes is to maintain employee health and improve productivity by reducing the chances of viral exposure⁽⁷⁾. Organizational leadership is primarily responsible for maintaining the organization's functioning during a crisis and ensuring corporate sustainability⁽⁸⁾. All the efforts, such as collaboration, participative management, and building a culture of trust made before a crisis,

significantly influence the survival of organizations during a crisis. However, a shift in leadership style occurs during a crisis following changing organizational priorities⁽⁸⁾. During the lockdown, the organizations used virtual teams, and the effectiveness of virtual work depends on the teams' structure and communication strategy adopted by organizations along with the supporting technology.

Several leadership styles in leadership decision-making processes involve transformational, delegative, authoritative, transactional, participative, and servant leadership styles⁽⁹⁾. The data for this study was carefully gathered from the systematically reviewed published articles that deal with the pandemic and post-pandemic stages, and the articles searched in MEDLINE, Google Scholar, PubMed, and medRxiv platforms with proper search terms of crisis and healthcare in response to the pandemic. The study characteristics based on the article title, published journal, publication date, etc., were established to develop an appropriate database. Microsoft Excel spreadsheets are supported to derive various study characteristics. Many study results were found to be derived based on the one-time staff interviews and employee reports from human resources. The articles were analyzed during the pandemic crisis outbreak mainly with a small sample size and recommended more studies needed with a large sample size to establish statistically robust results.

Results

Many organizations adopt a transformational leadership style during a crisis; leaders' effectiveness relies on adaptability based on the organization's situation⁽¹⁰⁾. Employee performance and emotions during a crisis have been studied and reported by a previously published article⁽¹¹⁾, and it has been clear that appropriate employee engagement impacts improving organizational outcomes. Employee engagement can bring work happiness, resolve problems, increase employee trust and loyalty, enhance the quality of relationships, and successfully face a crisis⁽¹²⁻¹⁴⁾. Leaders should focus on transformational leadership during a crisis, strengthening employee engagement, promoting internal communications, supporting organizations to bring outstanding results, increasing productivity, encouraging innovation, and bringing employee relational satisfaction⁽¹⁵⁻¹⁷⁾. Effective leadership makes crucial decisions during a crisis that lead to mostly good results, and this is the most critical mechanism every company chooses to achieve sustainable business in essential times.

Influential team leaders play strategic roles in bolstering employee engagement, establishing a work environment, providing help whenever needed, and promoting employee interactions and performance^(18, 19). Transformational leaders are crucial to supporting an organization while defining the mission, vision, and values, reforming the system to achieve goals, and reiterating members' commitment⁽²⁰⁾. The dimensions of transformational leadership may be classified as idealized influence, intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation, and individualized consideration⁽²⁰⁻²²⁾. Transformational leadership also connects to employee performance, work engagement, employee creativity, organizational commitments, creativity, communication, innovation, problem-solving, and creating an open climate for learning⁽²²⁾. Transformational leadership influences work engagement, service orientation, and critical role in organizational commitment, which bring advantages to organizations, including improved employee performance, responsibility, job satisfaction, higher service orientation, productivity, loyalty, and motivation, creating a favorable work environment and harmonious relations^(19, 23). This style of leadership promotes a better understanding of organizations, care, values, activities, support, ensures job satisfaction, motivates employees, develops a high degree of affective commitment, deals with organizational crises, and achieves organizational goals^(23, 24).

Several phases are generally required to implement a change in an organization, including the preparation phase, setting up internal communication, employee training, and program evaluation⁽²⁵⁾. Organizational employees and team leaders instantly adapt to new crisis scenarios and establish communication methods, and these changes affect all employees in the business organization. In a healthcare system, the decisions are usually taken by the leaders, CEOs, and hospital authorities, and the departmental manager/administrator could be a contact point. Immediate decisions are required for most scenarios, and the team leaders and employees instantly adapt to the new situation. An institution's mission, vision, values, and strategies are powerful enough to provide focus and direction during a crisis, and these points guide the leaders and employees in the organization. In a crisis, leaders think like owners, using long-term vision, creativity, the ability to adjust short-term missions, and ensuring employees' needs, empathy, and humility, which are all significant. Institutions go for several internal and external adjustments, including new software tools, improving collaboration, leaders

setting organizational priorities, and implementing solutions quickly⁽²⁶⁾. In a crisis, the executive leadership makes the decisions with the support of a network team, the change process is quickly implemented, and staff receive information through digital/ electronic communication methods⁽²⁷⁾.

Leaders formulated situation-dependent strategies to help the businesses emerge from the crisis, focus on workforce morale, and tackle issues such as working from home, mental health, social distancing, and job security. Leadership should understand the basics of crisis management, rally their team, take decisive actions, show calm and empathy to everyone, and communicate effectively with others. In a crisis, the decision-making must be more precise and concise than in any other situation. There is a need for accountability for everyone's actions, and the leadership team should maintain discipline. Leaders need to track the efforts to fight against the pandemic and support their businesses and employees.

Clear communication is significant to get the right people on the same page with a shared vision; communicating regularly with the team members supports better preparation to deal with change. Leadership in a crisis is responding to the coronavirus outbreak and future challenges by making appropriate decisions in uncertain times, building a network of teams, and communicating with teams/ stakeholders and communities. Leaders need to cultivate compassionate leadership in the organization, especially during a crisis, and they should respond calmly and optimistically to a crisis. Decisive leadership is crucial for determining success, and it has features of rapid response based on a clear understanding, ensuring good coordination, learning from previous disease outbreaks, and appreciating trusted public communications. Influential leaders believe partnerships bring solid reactions to crises, and in a global threat, they step up all leaders and cooperate with decisive actions to face a crisis successfully. Organizations promote a role of open, transparent, decisive, and compassionate leadership in the coming years to mitigate the socioeconomic impacts imposed by the present crisis⁽²⁸⁾. The literature recognized different leadership styles, especially during a crisis, such as transformational, transactional, participative, and contingency leadership styles, and good leaders do not entirely depend on a single style to manage situational requirements. Leaders are classified as task-oriented, people-oriented, and organization-oriented to respond effectively to a

public health crisis. They expect a wide array of competencies to manage a crisis successfully. Strategic leaders should have competencies in psychological stability, courage to make decisions, tolerance of ambiguity, balance to inspire team, confidence, emotional intelligence, self-assurance to confront the crisis, handle stress, have a sense of emergency, remain calm, and focus amid chaos. The fundamental qualities of influential leaders are availability, communication skills, transparency, visibility, listening skills, psychological safety, avoidance of dogmatism, and more. There is no place for blame culture, and numerous leadership competencies are essential to respond correctly, quickly, and logically under pressure to analyze problems, identify reasons for problems, and find permanent solutions. Strategic and operational planning is essential for leaders to successfully manage all crises, including preparedness, response, prevention, and recovery, and remember that every crisis and its management approaches are unique.

Leadership in crisis has certain vital functions such as decision-making, scanning the environment, networking and partnering, planning and organizing human resources, motivation, and team building. Strategic leaders are required to formulate quick decisions with limited information even under pressure to respond to a crisis effectively, search for various opportunities that may come from outside the organization, develop contacts in and outside the hospital, care for the healthcare workforce's well-being, motivate staff to optimize performance, and quickly organize teams with special training, skills, and competencies. Leaders should take appropriate time-sensitive actions through preparation and planning, leading adaptation, seeking information and intelligence, and ensuring a coordinated response; they also exhibit accountability and responsibility during a crisis⁽²⁹⁾. The role of leadership in a crisis is critical for healthcare organizations to direct the working group in a defined direction by motivating members to achieve organizational goals. Moreover, organizational success has been viewed as a competitive edge, and there is no agreement about how leadership skills develop^(30, 31). Effective leadership is attributed to a leader's personality traits, which are viewed as stable tendencies. This style is considered adequate for a situation, but a different leadership style is desirable for another situation. Transformational leaders continuously motivate team members, are mindful of their needs, offer feedback, inspire them to achieve expectations, and assist them in being more

creative and innovative to increase employee performance⁽³²⁻³⁵⁾.

Discussion

Classification based on leadership decision-making involves different styles, such as participative, democratic, consensus, consultative, and autocratic. Participative leadership looks for widespread staff input to make decisions, but the participative style fosters employee involvement that may lead to better performance; consultative leadership discusses events with employees to arrive at a decision; in participative style, employees feel ownership of decisions; in democratic leadership, the leaders move the responsibility of decision making to lower levels within the organization, in consensus leadership the leaders promotes discussion to achieve consensus, and an autocratic type leadership make decisions solely by the leader without employee involvement. Non-supportive leadership has minimal effect during a crisis, increasing employee stress levels due to various concerns like job security, health, and well-being. However, supportive leaders show empathy, understanding, and support, which is essential for employees, especially in a crisis. Good leadership is also actively involved in contingency planning in a crisis to enable effective responses, lay the groundwork for recovery, mitigate possible damage caused, and support effective responses to crises⁽⁸⁾. They support quality decision-making, planning, and coordinating activities, secure knowledge the team members provide, and improve cooperation⁽¹¹⁾. Transformational leaders are responsible for successfully facing the pandemic by taking active decisions and actions, encouraging employees to be innovative, and strengthening staff engagement through internal communication using communication flow, messages, and media⁽³⁶⁾. Internal communication promotes active communication between leaders and team members, encouraging knowledge sharing, collaboration, and creative support to enhance employee engagement. The main components of transformational leadership are inspirational motivation, individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, and idealized influence and these components are positively connected to individual and institutional performance. Studies recommended that transformational leaders should promote employee engagement to ensure the sustainability of organizations in a crisis⁽³⁷⁾.

There are fundamental dynamics a leader must regularly watch, such as the efficacy of health system surge and maintenance over time, the scaling of traditional public health, the

development of antibody testing, the nature of immunity, and innovation⁽³⁸⁾. Basic leadership strategies can be used for navigating a crisis, including identifying appropriate goals, identifying the path to communicate, engaging in conversations, being cognizant of everyone's needs, using emotional intelligence, minimizing perceptions of inequity, collaborating with key stakeholders and establishing liaison groups, empower team members to complete organizational objectives, be agile when leading change, and constantly assess the environment and prepare for the future⁽³⁹⁾. There are different ways a crisis can change the role of leaders, including the pandemic changing people's attitudes towards institutions in general and employers in particular; leaders need to respond by reframing their approach towards employees and focusing on the individual, drawing on sociology and systems thinking⁽⁴⁰⁾. More ways leaders can reframe their approach in a post-pandemic world like the individual, the leader as a sociologist, psychological safety, well-being and motivation, equitable experiences, and insight over data. The crucial points to remember to be a strategic leader during a crisis like a pandemic and beyond are that leaders must understand that this crisis has brought a unique flavor to test their leadership. Leadership during a crisis is never easy; young leaders can get frightened, stymied, and freeze, and even seasoned leaders can be challenged. This is when the team needs a true leader, who should have pocket fears and continuously engage with peers and team members. It is significant for leaders to model confidence; however, it is also necessary to acknowledge that crisis time is scary, so leaders must be agile and prepared to pivot as necessary. True leaders can make significant and minor tweaks and adapt quickly to the situation. The right people around play a crucial role in achieving this if they have the right tools to help them work through change.

Study limitations: Several limitations were reported, such as study results being derived based on the one-time staff interviews and employee reports from human resources; authors did not verify the reports directly from the population and did not observe how they communicated with employees during the pandemic crisis. Future studies are recommended using multiple techniques to better understand transformational leadership, employee engagement, and internal communication by exploring the interests of organizational human resources and employees. The articles were analyzed during the pandemic crisis outbreak with a small sample size, and future research is

warranted to perform extensive sample analysis and arrive at solid results. The study framework has many limitations since the study was conducted during the pandemic, an unprecedented phenomenon constantly evolving. The geographical location of the authors is different in many studies and needs to validate the framework in another context internationally.

Practical applications: Since the pandemic affected all business sectors globally, such as retail, hotel, travel, food and beverage, healthcare, share market, automotive, etc., they must adapt to this current situation and understand how to maintain sustainable businesses using a transformational leadership style. Since strategic leadership is critical for every business, they also have huge responsibilities, especially during a global pandemic involving regional, national, and international businesses. Excellent leaders formulate and implement strategic decisions for the best of the organization; rapid decisions and associated work changes, both internally and externally, are inevitable for organizational success even after the crisis.

Conclusion

The pandemic has exposed the healthcare system to limited capacities and preparedness towards a crisis and identified pre-crisis management education and training as integral parts of crisis management for hospital leaders. Healthcare leaders frequently face new challenges during a crisis that may be beyond the scope of previous practices and experience, and crisis-specific managerial competencies may be required for healthcare leaders to manage outbreaks successfully. Clear and unavoidable responsibilities arise in the crisis for healthcare leaders to prepare for a new standard right after the crisis, and the current pandemic crisis affected employees'

emotions, productivity, adaptability, leadership styles, and organizational performance. Transformational leadership style is most effective in supporting, motivating, and informing to accommodate rapidly changing situations like a pandemic crisis. Transformational leadership styles help maintain the sustainability of organizations during and after a pandemic crisis. Ensuring employee engagement and encouraging intellectual stimulation, motivation, innovation, creativity, and employee involvement are essential for a business's survival during and after a crisis. Transformational leaders use various tactics to make decisions, internal communications, implement decisions, provide inspirational motivations, enhance employees' capabilities to promote innovation, show the significance of supporting the organization, and strengthen employee engagement. The role of influential leaders in organizations is crucial, especially in a crisis, ranging from routine management activities to enhancing employee engagement and handling extra-work roles such as strategist, technology expert, mentor, entrepreneur, coach, and team member. Leadership style changes are recommended to accommodate swift changes in work situations during a crisis like a pandemic.

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