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Consistency in Leadership during a Pandemic: Managing Academics at a Private Higher Education Institution in South Africa

Willy H. Engelbrecht

Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic forced leaders to adapt their leadership approaches to the online environment. This chapter reviews the leadership approaches applied by managers at a Private Higher Education Institution (PHEI) in response to the Covid-19 pandemic and examines how these managers ensured that academics perform optimally while working remotely. A qualitative research methodology, combined with semi-structured interviews, enabled the researcher to source rich data from the managers and academics at the PHEI in question. Most managers indicated that only minor adjustments to their leadership approaches were required to work in a remote online environment. Participants also noted that a combination of various leadership approaches in a specific context enhances a leader's efficiency, as it allows them to analyze a situation and consider the impact of proposed approaches on stakeholders before a decision is made.

Keywords: leadership, Covid-19, private higher education, academics, South Africa

1. Introduction

The novel Coronavirus (referred to as Covid-19) in the rest of this chapter caused major disruptions worldwide during 2020. Industries across the globe have been forced to rethink their operational models to ensure resiliency when faced with disruptions like the Covid-19 pandemic. Organizations have had to get accustomed to conducting business and being profitable despite strict lockdown restrictions imposed by governments, to prevent the rapid spread of Covid-19. In the case of higher education, which services approximately 80% of the student population across 150 countries had to cease in-person learning [1, 2] and transfer to online learning [3, 4] by the end of March 2020. The rapid transfer to online learning resulted in various unexpected costs for institutions, academics, administrative staff, and students [3, 5]. Higher education institutions in South Africa were also impacted by lockdowns, with academics being required to work remotely. Leadership has had to apply a consistent approach in managing academics whilst achieving institutional goals and objectives, by making efficient use of online mechanisms. To date, there has been no evidence indicating which leadership approaches work best for remote teams, especially in the Private Higher Education

(PHE) sector [6]. This chapter focuses on the positive impact of leadership consistency on academics and their mandate to serve all students.

2. Private higher education in South Africa and the pandemic

The South African higher education landscape consists of approximately 131 private and 26 public higher education institutions, 50 technical and vocational education and training (TVET) colleges, 9 community education and training (CET) colleges, and 287 registered private colleges [7]. This sector is strictly regulated by the Council on Higher Education (CHE), which is an independent statutory quality council overseen by the Department of Higher Education, Science and Technology (DHET) [8, 9]. A record number of 208,978 students (16% of the student population) enrolled at Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) in South Africa in 2019. This figure increases year on year, as there is an extremely high demand for higher education qualifications [9, 10]. This demand is created by the assumption that a higher education qualification increases job prospects and improves the quality of life [11, 12]. It is, however, important to note that the success of PHEIs in South Africa depends on their ability to deliver graduates with industry-relevant competencies that will enable them to actively contribute to the economy and become global citizens [13].

The Covid-19 pandemic exposed the weaknesses of HEI, including their inability to swiftly move to online learning. This inability is mainly the result of higher education institutions (HEIs) not using online learning management systems (LMSs), like Blackboard, Sakai, and Moodle [4, 13–19]. Some of the most notable challenges that leaders have had to manage to include:

- Academic's resistance to a methodological change in teaching and learning practices through an LMS.
- Time constraints on the development of adequate, skills-focused assessments online and in open-book format to assess students' knowledge competencies [20].
- The ability of academics to incorporate new technological tools and software to enable student learning in the online environment [20]. The lack of technological skills and inability to quickly master online software and technology, which placed further stress and anxiety on academics and students (on top of the shorter academic semester) [19].
- Student engagement, which has proven even more challenging online given the disruption that comes with the use of the technology when teaching through online platforms [21].

The Covid-19 pandemic has been impacting academics and students, with leadership having to find ways to save the academic year without compromising education quality or academics and student wellbeing. The sudden shift to online teaching and learning impacted academics' ability to effectively deliver on deadlines [22]. Leadership teams have had to ensure that students continue their studies whilst academics continue to deliver on the PHEI's mandate. This requires consistency in current leadership approaches with a slight adjustment to the application of the leadership style.

3. Leadership during a disruption

A unique feature of HEIs in South Africa is each institution's perception of quality and how it should be applied (in conjunction with institutional strengths) to achieve its goals [15]. This creates diversity amongst the various HEIs; each institution views itself as unique and the best in delivering graduates to the market. There is a constant drive to ensure that high-quality graduates gain immediate employment and that business intelligence software is used to identify potential gaps in the learning process. However, the social, economic, and policy/governance conditions [23] in South Africa make it extremely challenging for leadership, especially at PHEIs, to keep academics engaged despite the constant changes in the regulatory and external environment. The biggest challenge since the restructuring of HEIs in the early 2000s has been the transformation into a digital learning community, which was fast-tracked by the Covid-19-pandemic. This fast-tracked shift to online teaching and learning has raised several questions about the equality, accessibility, training, and accountability of academics from a student perspective [4, 24]. HEI leadership had to carefully consider how the sudden shift to online learning would affect PHEI students and academics. As such, leadership has had to remain principle-driven in the decision-making process and ensure that students are at the center of each decision [17]. In addition, leaders in this sector are required to be flexible, adaptable, and reflective in their leadership approaches, especially during times of disruption or change [25–27].

An individual's ability to influence others in reaching a common goal or objective, using a motivation to establish coherence amongst the team [16, 17, 28], is considered leadership. It is the leader's responsibility to continuously monitor the external environment and influence the team's approach in achieving a goal. A leader gives direction when no one else can see the way forward. The Covid-19 pandemic forced HEI leadership teams to reaffirm and showcase their abilities to get teams on board and implement changes as a collective to ensure students successfully complete the academic year [4, 26, 29, 30]. Leadership teams had to ensure that academics, operations, administration, information technology systems, and facilities departments (amongst others) worked together to deliver exceptional service and support to students during the shift to online learning.

With the constant change in HEIs, leaders must constantly adapt to the changes in the external and internal business environments, whilst prioritizing the aim and purposes of the institution [24, 26]. The vision of the PHEI in question is to provide students with a quality higher education experience, focusing on equitable delivery of material and assessments through the institution's LMS. In addition, the PHEI in question aims to leave no student behind and ensure that students become global citizens who, at some point in time, will pay it forward. The vision of the institution has always been its main driver, and this did not change during the hard lockdown (27 March to 21 April 2020). Rather, the institution reaffirmed its vision amongst academics and found solutions to better support students and make its vision a reality. The extent to which leadership teams promoted efficacy amongst their teams was critical to the success of the new working conditions and the delivery of quality higher educational material and assessments to students [31].

Table 1 provides an overview of the various leadership approaches that exist. Given this chapter's nature and purpose, middle-level managers in a PHEI was the target population. At middle-level management, it is important that leaders focus on achieving the goals and objectives of the PHEI as determined by the senior executive team. The other two leadership categories (contemporary leadership and emerging approaches to leadership) align with lower levels of management and

Leadership category	Leadership style/approach	Summary
Contemporary leadership	Level 5 leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Has a tier level of managerial capabilities.• Focuses on the leader’s ability to be modest in their approach to managing employees.• Leader accepts responsibility for successes and failures in the team and gives credit to employees where it is due.• Organization’s success is based on the founding values and principles that drive the organizational culture and influences employee behavior.• Leader is driven to develop the talent in the team and ensure that succession plans are in place.• Professional development of employees in the institution enables growth and success in achieving institutional goals.
	Servant leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Focuses on resolving social issues and challenges faced by the community.• Ethical behavior and practices drive these leaders to affect change in communities.• Strong focus on the role and purpose of the organization in the community.• There is a shared approach to organizational success, goals and incentives.• Use skills and knowledge to serve others, like non-governmental or non-profitable organizations.
	Authentic leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• High levels of self-efficacy that is supported by strong ethical values and objectivity.• Stay true to what the leader believes in, like moral values and beliefs.• Focus on collaborations and develop others into respected and respectful leaders.• Leader is self-disciplined, establishes relationships, pursues a purpose with passion and commitment, and has solid values.
	Interactive leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Agreement is reached on a shared goal.• Relationship is personal and not authoritative in nature.• Shows strong signs of humility, inclusion, relationship building, and care for employees and customers.

Leadership category	Leadership style/approach	Summary
New leadership paradigm	Transactional leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Matches employee needs and organizational objectives.• Sets clear goals and tasks for employees to achieve a specific outcome.• Conforms to organizational structures, policies, and systems within which work has to be executed.• Manages performance through incentives and/or punishment.• Focuses on achieving organizational goals and objectives.
	Transformational leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Develops relationships with employees to develop the individual in the workplace.• Creates a shared vision that is supported by innovation and creativity.• Recognizes the individual and provides different perspectives on challenges to ensure a positive outcome.• Is collaborative in nature and feedback is key to all goals being reached, with the incentive being personal self-development rather than rewards.• Motivation is mutual and enables higher-order goals to be achieved.• Inspires, empowers, and stimulates followers.
	Charismatic leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Leader is charismatic and inspires support and acceptance.• Establishes positive relationships by setting specific goals.• Inspires followers to achieve goals by establishing and maintaining strong positive relationships.• Leader has a strong personality, good communication skills, compassion, confidence and demonstrates positive body language.• Leader applies an outcome-based approach, no matter what it takes.• The leader is a visionary and stimulates and motivates others to achieve goals.• Followers are fixed on the ideology of the leader and have similar beliefs showcasing affection and obedience towards the leader with a strong emotional involvement.• Followers are focused on achieving the common goal established by the leader rather than their individual goals.

Leadership category	Leadership style/approach	Summary
Emerging approaches to leadership	Strategic leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Leader understands the intricacies of the organization and business environments to lead the organization to succeed.• Leader can only be successful if there is a good foundation of the organization’s history, culture, strengths, and weaknesses.• Leader has to be a visionary capable of identifying potential future trends, whilst managing current organizational conditions to have the organization succeed.
	Cross-cultural leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Leader is able to understand and work with employees from diverse cultural backgrounds.• Leader has affection and respect for other cultures and implements an inclusive organizational culture.• Leader must understand how the various cultures perceive rewards/incentives and work around goal setting and overall organizational performance.
	Ethical leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Leader establishes ethical practices in the organization.• Important that this leader portrays ethical conduct in a professional and personal capacity.• Focuses on successful implementation of corporate governance practices.
	Crisis leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• This leader can create meaning from a crisis and provide a clear direction on the way forward.• Crisis leaders have exceptional communication skills as it is important to send out transparent messaging during the crisis and keep all employees updated on any changes.• Focuses on a collaborative work environment as crises require employees to often take on more roles and responsibilities to navigate a crisis.• These leaders can adapt their leadership approach during a crisis to steer the organization through the crisis and ensure it remains sustainable and profitable.• Builds solid relationships with all stakeholders (internal and external) and keeps them abreast of developments.

Table 1.
Summary of leadership approaches [32].

executive management, respectively. It could, however, be argued that leadership is not just one of these styles, but the ability to analyze situations and apply whichever leadership style is necessary to ensure that a specific goal is reached.

Leaders in the PHE sector must constantly wear two hats: an academic hat and a business hat. It is close to impossible to have these two idealists join in a conversation and agree on matters without significant debate. If the debate aligns with other HEIs, the academia and arguments around it often get a seat at the table. When a disruption like Covid-19 occurs, it becomes difficult to find a solution that will be beneficial to the business (financially and sustainably), and ensure that students continue to receive a quality education during the disruption. This requires that academic leadership teams in PHEIs have a variety of leadership skills while following a consistent leadership approach and successfully marrying business and academia. It takes time and effort to get a workable solution that ensures student-centricity and business sustainability. Consistency in leadership is what ensured the PHEI in question's success and enabled it to guide academics and students through the hard lockdown as well as the enduring pandemic.

Table 1 shows the variety of leadership styles available. This research emphasizes the characteristics of transactional leadership, transformational leadership, and crisis leadership. All three of these leadership approaches align with the PHEI in question, as it has remained goal-oriented (transactional) and people-oriented (transformational) throughout the pandemic (crisis). These three approaches will be unpacked in the following. The findings will showcase how a blend of these three theories ensured academic consistency and efficacy in delivering quality higher education to students.

3.1 Transactional leadership

Educational leaders applying a transactional approach clearly define individual roles and responsibilities in alignment with organizational processes and procedures, whereafter an agreement is reached on the timeframe within which goals must be achieved [33–36]. A reward or incentive is in most instances attached to an individual's key performance areas (KPA's) and takes the form of performance bonuses, additional leave, salary increase, or (in cases of unsatisfactory performance) disciplinary action [36, 37]. The relationship that exists in this leadership approach is often a leader vs. follower approach, which could be detrimental to individuals wanting to challenge the status quo and bring new ideas to the table. Leaders applying this form of leadership are more focused on achieving organizational goals and objectives than on developing individuals in gaining more skills and improving organizational processes and procedures.

3.2 Transformational leadership

Transformational leaders focus on developing and inspiring individuals through a collaborative approach by being proactive about change whilst staying focused on the institutional goals and objectives [33, 35, 37]. These leaders carefully analyze academic's expectations and then influence them and gain their trust. Additional support and guidance are provided to help academics align their personal goals with that of the institution, ensuring that individual and organizational goals and objectives are met [38–41]. Solidarity keeps transformational leaders moving forward, as long as the goals and objectives to be achieved are framed with the collective approach in mind. The problem with transformational leaders is that they can be both charismatic and narcissistic in their approach to transforming others in reaching organizational goals and objectives. Furthermore, these leaders are often

ignorant of present challenges and only focus on the future and how the future will look and feel different from the present [35]. This often puts more pressure on academics to achieve the future self, just to arrive there and find that the goalpost has shifted again. Ultimately, the transformational leader is one that inspires, motivates, stimulates, and gives individual attention to academic, making them feel a sense of value and worth [39, 40, 42].

3.3 Crisis leadership

The fast reaction required by HEI leaders in South Africa to shift to online teaching and learning leans itself to the preferred leadership style to apply. Given the fast-changing pace of higher education, being flexible, adaptable, and able to predict future changes from the volatile external environment is a key competency for any leader, whether it is related to a crisis or not [43]. There are three key factors that leaders face when leading a team through a crisis, namely: the ability to “improve awareness of the factors that constitute a crisis”; “the ability to clearly explain the experiences associated with the crisis being dealt with”; and “the ability to navigate a crisis” [43]. It is critical that leaders who find themselves in a crisis situation have the ability to clearly direct the attention of academics to where their focus should be and how to resolve the crisis; make sense of the situation and communicate a clear message to the teams so that everyone is on the same page; promote the collaborative work culture until the crisis has been resolved; and engage in adaptive leadership styles to ensure that the ultimate goal of the organization is achieved throughout the crises [4, 24, 44].

It is evident that a mixture of the three leadership approaches enabled the PHEI in question to successfully support students and academics through the hard lockdown and enduring pandemic in 2020. One leadership approach would not have had the same impact as a combination of the three leadership styles, together with consistency. The sudden change of leadership style in a crisis like the Covid-19 pandemic could increase stress for academics and students, confirming the importance of consistency in leadership. What has to be determined is whether or not leaders can follow their leadership approaches remotely using technology in a higher education setting.

4. Methodology

The research question focused on determining the impact of Covid-19 on leadership approaches of managers in a PHEI to effectively manage academic performance while they work remotely. The study applied a phenomenology approach in which an inductive qualitative approach enabled the researcher to source rich data on the changes in leadership approaches due to the Covid-19 pandemic [45–48] directly from the managers and academics.

Semi-structured interview schedules were developed, and the managers and academics were asked similar questions. The application of the inductive approach enabled the researcher to ask “what” managers and academics perceived the leadership approach of the manager to be before and during the Covid-19 pandemic. The “how” question came into effect by asking managers their perception of whether their leadership style had changed and how it changed (if at all) [49]. Academics were asked to describe how they perceived their manager’s leadership style after the first hard lockdown (27 March to 21 April 2020) when they had to work remotely. The four managers from the four faculties that agreed to participate in this research were all interviewed face-to-face at the PHEI in the question’s offices. The

academics requested online interviews given that they had to talk about their line managers and were not comfortable doing so in the open-plan offices at the institution where they work. The institution had five faculties at the time of the research being conducted, but only four of the five faculties signed the participant consent form acknowledging their interest in participating in the research. The remaining faculty never responded to any of the email communication that was sent to invite individuals to participate in the research.

The academic parameters included a minimum of 3 years of working experience, the designation of senior academic in their faculty, and at least 3 years of reporting to the relevant line manager. Of the five senior academics who conformed to the parameters at the time, only four academics (one from each faculty, apart from the faculty not participating) indicated their interest in participating in the research. The respondents all agreed to the interviews being recorded and it lasted 45–60 minutes. The interviews took place in November 2020, 8 months after the hard lock down and just before the second wave started in South Africa. This enabled the respondents to reflect on the time that had passed and consider the changes and the effects it had had on them as managers and academics.

The interviews were transcribed, then thematically analyzed by the researcher. The researcher read through the transcribed interviews and identified specific themes identified by each of the managers and the academics. The researcher familiarized themselves with the content of the transcripts, whereafter a coding process followed from which themes were generated. The various themes were reviewed, defined, and written up [50]. The inductive approach enabled the researcher to identify key themes for consideration by managers when it comes to deciding on leadership approaches to apply during a crisis. The credibility and dependability of the data rest on the triangulation of the data from the managers and the senior academic members reporting to the respective managers. This confirmed that the responses from managers are a true reflection of what transpired during the hard lockdown in the respective faculties. The researcher obtained ethical clearance (R. 15,487) from the PHEI to conduct this research.

5. Findings and discussion

The findings revealed two core themes, namely consistency during a crisis and the culmination of various leadership characteristics are important. Consistency is critical and it was evident in all the interviews with the relevant managers that minor amendments were made to their leadership style application, but that new styles were not adopted. The academics confirmed this by stating that their managers were “*supportive, approachable; knowledgeable, share information, developmental, provide guidance, trust, collaborative and empowered them*”. These characteristics are evident of a unique, good leader [4, 15–17, 25–30]. Furthermore, transformational leadership requires the delegation of responsibilities to develop academics. In two of the faculties where appointments were made during the pandemic, the educational leaders assigned the new employees to senior academic members to conduct training and act as mentors. The senior academic therefore had daily interactions with the new academic. The educational leaders could focus their attention on more pressing matters whilst knowing that the new academics were being trained and supported as per institutional requirements. This showcased leadership’s ability to transform academics by delegating training and mentoring roles in the faculty to academics, thereby transforming academics and building more capacity.

The crisis leadership style element manifested in the form of weekly faculty meetings changing to daily meetings (educational managers and academics noted

this). One of the academics responded by saying: *“the way in which they [the manager] managed did not change. But the situation called for frequent meetings and it is not about the academic but the situation”*. The aim of these daily meetings was to concentrate on academic wellness and delivery of student material, as assessments had to be adjusted to online and take-home assessments in record time, to accommodate students having to write exams. All this had to happen while ensuring that the academic year did not get too far behind schedule. The changes in the external environment necessitated educational leaders to adopt certain crisis leadership principles [43] to navigate the faculties through the pandemic-induced changes in HEIs. One of the educational leaders noted that *“trust is built through collaboration and empowering others”*. This refers to the ability of educational leaders to retain their leadership approach, reduce academic’s anxiety and establish some sense of normalcy during the pandemic. Academic supported this notion through *“an increase in communication and support”* by educational leaders to navigate the sudden changes. Furthermore, one of the managers noted that another manager had bi-weekly coffee chats with academics, which focused solely on academic wellbeing and not work. This created a supportive working environment in which trust is built.

A statement from one of the academics captured what another academic said, namely that they have *“strong internal locus of control. It is about doing what I do”*. The academics all had experience, which added to them being able to work efficiently through the pandemic with their educational leader. It is in these instances that academics felt that their educational leaders manage individual outputs and give them the freedom to work within the parameters of the job specification. The freedom to work within the parameters of a given position and managing academics outputs is one of the key leadership abilities that the PHEI requires from its leadership corps. The leadership approach of most managers aligns with the PHEI vision and goals, which is transactional, yet transformational in nature. The educational leaders must establish a collaborative work environment in which academics develop new skillsets and knowledge about higher education, teaching and learning, quality assessments, and operational delivery of material. Throughout the pandemic, the educational leaders have been communicating the vision and mission of the PHEI and reminding academics of their role within the institution. It is evident that in this case, educational leaders embraced the institutional governance systems and processes to promote the institution’s vision and mission while being compassionate and understanding of the socio-cultural circumstances of all stakeholders [32]. The ability of educational leaders to be business-oriented and academically inclined has enabled the institution to successfully navigate the pandemic by ensuring students are serviced and academics’ well-being is taken into consideration. One aspect that came out of the interviews, which can be considered either positive or negative, depending on the context, is the amount of training academics had to undergo during the hard lockdown to make changes to assessments. This showed the need for PHEIs to invest more in upskilling academics on digital or online assessment practices. This should not just be for the pandemic but as a means of going forward to become a transformed 4th industrial revolution institution. This finding is important for the PHEI (as it is for any HEI); to be successful it requires leadership that is business and academic thought leaders.

Contrary to the view of the authors [51] the educational leaders embraced the online tools and software to support their leadership style through regular informal check-ins with academics, switching on videos to show their faces, and make time in meetings for academic to share their best practices in dealing with hard lockdown regulations [24–26]. It is clear that educational leaders analyzed the situation and adapted using the relevant tools and software to engage with academics and ensure student material is delivered [52].

6. Conclusion

This chapter outlined the challenges that Covid-19 brought to the PHEI sector in South Africa. **Table 1** summarizes the key characteristics of the various leadership approaches. Each leadership approach is unique and has a specific aim. It is important to note that subordinates will not necessarily analyze the leader's performance in different situations or circumstances, but rather look at the extent to which the leader practices consistent, fair, and equitable decision-making within the given circumstances. Future research should be done on the leadership applied within public higher education institutions to determine if there is consistency between public and private institutions of higher education.

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