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Leadership Strategies Amidst Disruption and Shock: Communication Implications

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Leaders' prompt communication about the COVID-19 pandemic was critical to stakeholders' safety and knowledge about the uncertainty of organizational operations. In this study, the communication of various university leaders was analyzed in response to the new decade's deadliest exogenous shock, the spread of the deadly COVID-19 virus. Content analysis of statements from a sample of leaders in public universities contained elements of situational, behavioral, and adaptive leadership. The analysis was conducted to identify leaders' statements detailing contingencies being implemented for the survivability of their universities. Primarily studied were leader statements responding to the intensity and severity of the pandemic, rapid changes affecting the well-being of stakeholders, and essential organizational functioning. The findings of this study showed the need for institutional leaders to deliver prompt responses that quickly move people to action while paying attention to the multitude of stakeholder needs. Leaders communicating in situational, behavioral, and adaptive leadership were found to effectively communicate messages with clarity, meaning, and empathy that were responsive to the wave of uncertainty and shocks exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Key words: adaptive leadership, exogenous shocks, leadership communication, situational leadership

Leadership Strategies for Disruption and Shock: Communication Implications

Disruption and shocks affect organizational leaders' responsiveness to communicating a continuity of care to their organization and constituents. The global COVID-19 pandemic intensified the need for a greater understanding of leadership responses to major disruptions. Pandemic-level exogenous shocks force leaders to swiftly communicate to a multitude of employees, students, and

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other stakeholders, who are undoubtedly concerned about their well-being and the organization's existence (Craven et al., 2020). Exogenous shocks have historically been a focus of crisis management research, specifically to provide leaders with evidence-based information useful to their readiness for contingent and emergent situations (Craven et al., 2020). The circumstances for shocks include events that appear suddenly, entail far-reaching consequences on human conditions, are severe, and create a crisis for aspects of human socialization and civilization (Fligstein & McAdam, 2011).

The COVID-19 pandemic is considered an exogenous shock with serious implications for organizations' continued existence. For leaders, the entropic nature of exogenous shocks calls for rapid adaptive responses beyond leadership in business-as-usual times (Anderson, 2018). Communication crisis management is prevalent in the military, health care, and emergency management industries. Exogenous shocks are not new for leaders, but occurrences of epic and global proportions have so seldom occurred that many do not know how to rapidly respond to such chaos. The key challenge for leaders during an exogenous shock is in deciphering the intensity and the complexities of that shock into accurate and immediate messages. This study addressed the use of existing leadership theories and approaches for leaders as an effective response to exogenous shocks.

Leaders had to swiftly communicate appropriate information to layers of organizational constituents that would keep such groups apprised of an organization's status after the shock. The uncertainty required prompt and adaptive responses from leaders unlike during "business as usual" times (Ahern & Loh, 2020). Precise communication, known to foster resilience in leaders and their organizations when faced with adversity (Ahern & Loh, 2020), has been shown to effectively rally stakeholders to take safety precautions and energize leaders to begin reorganizing work structures, tasks, and the overall design of an organization (Stoller, 2020).

Leaders' responses and strategies were heightened during the COVID-19 pandemic as communication was vital to organizational operations and stakeholder management (Coombs, 2004; Davis & Gardner, 2012; Weiner et al.,

1988). Communicating timely and relevant information is essential for leaders to maintain rapport with stakeholders, as leaders are the source of duty of care and survival during exogenous shocks. Leaders' primary concern is how to sway their stakeholders to the idea that what is being communicated is true, just, and meaningful and not just leadership rhetoric (Davis & Gardner, 2012). Strengthening stakeholder rapport during cataclysmic events promotes the idea that open communication and trust are being forged—key elements of leader–member crisis relationships (Avery et al., 2010). During shocks and disruptions, how leaders publicize care and concern is vital for easing stakeholders' emotional states (Coombs & Holladay, 1996). Leaders who convey genuine sadness about calamity that affects stakeholders' health, socioeconomic status, lifestyle, and general well-being have been evaluated more favorably in public acceptance of the leaders' communication (Madera & Smith, 2009).

Protection of their livelihood is the main lens through which institutional community members and stakeholders evaluate leadership statements about the status and force of the shock. People look for communication that specifically explains any ease to social, health, financial, and wage burdens (Coombs, 2004; Davis & Gardner, 2012; Weiner et al., 1988). Coombs (2004) suggested that situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) is fitting for leaders given the responsibility for publishing intense crisis-related statements because the theory focuses on interlocking past crisis intervention communication with current crisis messaging. Weaving stories of past situations and data into current messaging strengthens the public's perception of a leader's competency to successfully navigate the flux and complexities of the new event (Coombs, 2004). For example, the World Health Organization's (WHO; 2020) leaders used language in early notifications about the spread of COVID-19 to convey how populations around the world recovered from SARS and MERS in the past.

Stakeholders and followers are known to deeply analyze leadership information to identify the origin and ownership of an event (Davis & Gardner, 2012). Attribution theorists like Weiner et al. (1988) proposed that stakeholders will make shrewd judgments about how the shock occurred, the effect on the organization, and the

capabilities (attributes) of leaders to successfully lead the organization through such complexities. Stakeholders will look for who is responsible and who will fix the organization back to some form of past or future normalcy (Davis & Gardner, 2012). Additionally, stakeholders will scrutinize and analyze leaders' communication from past crises to determine how leaders will handle critical issues in a current crisis (Coombs, 2004).

As the disruption and shock around the COVID-19 pandemic evolved from late 2019 to early 2020, leaders in all organizations and industries were faced with vital decisions about organizational operations and communicating with stakeholders. Leaders were faced with rapidly changing events that affected stakeholders and the survival of the organization; many had no prior experience in managing and leading through this magnitude of disruption. While leaders may have previously faced some form of disruption or adversity, the COVID-19 pandemic was extremely different than what most had previously experienced. Research has sought to explain the nature and impact of crises to support organizations and leaders in preparing for; responding to; and overcoming shocks, disruptions, and crises to preserve performance, recover, and prevent decline and failure (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2015). In response to the rapid increase in challenges and threats to organizations, research is needed to better explain how leaders can respond in times of adversity; which can potentially mitigate crises before they arise (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2015). A critical assumption for this research was that leaders of an organization play an important role in organizational crisis communication. Leaders are assumed to be both the internal and external authority in an apex of communication that effectively responds to crisis (Dolan et al., 2006).

For effective management of an exogenous shock, leaders need to quickly detect potential warning signs and accurately interpret them to be able to mobilize organizational attention and resources (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). Leaders then need to communicate to internal and external stakeholders regarding the crisis, its consequences, and the decisions affecting organizational operations (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). The challenge for leaders is to repair and restore operational disturbances caused by the shock (Kahn et al., 2013), transitioning the

organization from emergency response mode to some form of normalcy (James & Wooten, 2005).

This research focused on critically analyzing a sample of leader responses from the onset of the exogenous shock—the COVID-19 pandemic—and the evolution of the leaders' responses as the pandemic continued. Content analysis was used to discover the leadership theories rooted in the leaders' responses about the COVID-19 organizational impacts to identify how leadership theories may be used for effective crisis management. The main themes and subthemes were also analyzed through content analysis to answer the following questions:

Research Question 1: What leadership theories were present in the statements?
Research Question 2: Which leadership theories were most prominent in the statements?
Research Question 3: What subthemes of the theories were present in the statements?

Research Methods

As a qualitative data analysis technique, a content analysis research design was used in this study. Content analysis in leadership research provides advantages for richer detail, safeguarding greater context information, and potential for grounded theory development (Insch et al., 1997). By analyzing the contents of statements from a sample of public universities in the U.S. Midwest, this study identified and evaluated leadership theories and approaches used in the public communications at the beginning of 2020 and the subsequent statements as the pandemic intensified.

To identify the leadership theories and approaches in official communications, 206 public statements were collected from the universities' websites that were released between January 2020 and March 2020. The statements identified met the criteria determined for this study. The criteria for the statements were focused on the university leaders' statements regarding specific actions taken regarding operational changes and communications with stakeholders about COVID-19. The statements used were only from the president or chancellor's cabinets within the

university; statements from other departments or offices were not used to focus the study on the specific leadership responses. Statements that were specific to an action taken in response to a COVID-19-related disruption were utilized to remain within the scope of the study. The frames used to guide the selection of statements were: COVID-19; changes; operations; and staff; faculty; and students. Using the frames, the statements specific to the identified leader sample and related to a response to stakeholders regarding the COVID-19 disruption were used for the analysis.

Sample

A purposeful sample of leaders at 12 public universities in the U.S. Midwest was used in this research. The universities were chosen given the peculiar nature of higher education institutions as organizations. The universities were selected based on similarities in student population size to hold constant the scope and size of the university, in addition to all of them being public institutions. Each of the universities was represented equally in statements with similar amounts and scopes of the statements. Universities are central to society by providing links between state, market, civil society, and private organizations (Eaton & Stevens, 2020). As mentioned earlier, this study used universities as the sample given the remunerated value of higher education to the survival of global human ecologies (Gaus, 1947). Universities are complex organizations that hold multiple meanings simultaneously as businesses, agents of governments, and philanthropies (Eaton & Stevens, 2020). Universities are increasingly confronted with a multitude of internal and external stakeholder groups, including staff, students, government agencies, employers, and community members. Universities are under pressure to manage relations with stakeholders for long-term survival and face crises and exogenous shocks in the same fashion as other organizational types. Universities are complex systems that interact with a complex environment. With a myriad of diverse stakeholders, multiple missions, and distinct internal cultures, leaders must navigate the loosely coupled systems through effective communication (Orton & Weick, 2011). Given the complexity of universities and the need for leaders to effectively communicate with multiple stakeholders, this sample provides

generalizability across many organization types. The needs, goals, and expectations for leaders are complex during times of normalcy and are further aggravated and accentuated during times of shock, disruption, and crisis.

Data Coding, Analysis, Validity, and Reliability

The leader statements were analyzed in the content analysis method, which is a widely used method in social sciences and leadership studies. *Content analysis* is a research tool used to determine the presence of specific themes and concepts within the text. The process includes the quantification and analysis of the presence, meanings, and relationships of words and concepts. The final phase of the process is to make inferences about the messages within the statements. Reliability especially depends on the coding process. The reliability requires that the different encoders use the same codes in the same text and way (Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1999). For credibility and dependability, Corbin and Strauss's (1996) subjective inter-coder reliability method was used. Two of the three researchers coded the transcripts independently and began to formulate provisional codes and categories. The research team then created a mutual understanding of codes to refine the coding framework. Extracts of data were coded to as many themes/subthemes as relevant. Themes were further refined and reduced by examining coherent patterns in the coded data. For this study, data categories and codes were performed by two researchers working independently of each other. Finally, the codes and the categories were compared using NVivo 12.

The statements were initially coded for leadership theories that were inferred from the messages or communications. After identification through initial coding, leadership theories and approaches were recognized by recording patterns in the technique, content, themes, and subthemes used in the statements. The patterns were identified by grouping similarly worded statements, as well as by the statements with similar information, scope, structure, and messages. Statements were then coded again to refine the major leadership theories and approaches present in statements. The coding identified adaptive leadership, situational leadership, and behavioral theories of leadership present in the statements from

university leadership regarding the pandemic. In some of the statements, all the leadership theories and approaches were present. In these cases, the predominant approach or theory was counted. The researchers independently analyzed the statements and indicated which theory and approach were present. One researcher then compiled the results to determine which theory or approach was predominant in the statements based on the initial analyses.

Adaptive leadership was identified in messages aligning with the definition established by Heifetz et al. (2009) as the "practice of mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges and thrive" (14). With adaptive leadership as the main theme, the subthemes of situational challenges, leader behavior, and adaptive work were identified in the statements. *Situational challenges* can be technical, have both a technical and adaptive dimension, and be primarily adaptive (Heifetz et al., 2009). *Leader behaviors in adaptive leadership* were identified as helping others confront difficult challenges and describing the changes that will come from those challenges (Heifetz, 1994; Heifetz & Laurie, 1997). *Adaptive work* was identified through the communications as messages intended to help people feel safe as they confronted the changes resulting from the difficult challenges (Heifetz et al., 2009).

Situational leadership was identified in the messages that were flexible by adapting styles to numerous factors in the workplace and focusing on leadership in situations (Blanchard et al., 2013). This leadership approach stresses directive and supportive dimensions with each applied appropriately in the given situation. Situational leadership suggests that the messages will change given the degree to which they need to be directive or supportive to meet the changing needs of the situation (Northouse, 2019). The subthemes of situational leadership were identified in the messages as communications were tailored to the target audiences. These subthemes were telling, selling, participating, and delegating (Blanchard et al., 1993).

Behavioral approaches in leadership identified in the statements were rooted in task-oriented and relationship-oriented approaches. *Behavioral approaches* focus on what the leader does and how they engage in task and relationship behaviors. *Task-oriented behaviors* focus on directives for accomplishing goals and achieving

objectives (Northouse, 2019). *Relationship behaviors* focus on supporting followers in the present situation, aligning more with encouraging participative and empowerment behaviors (DeRue et al., 2011).

Findings

The findings of the content analysis produced widespread numbers across the three leadership approaches and theories (adaptive leadership, situational leadership, and behavioral theories of leadership). Results consisted of 420 descriptions of leadership approaches and styles in the statements.

Leadership Theories and Approaches (Research Question 1)

From the descriptions, three distinct leadership approaches were further categorized into three types of leadership approaches or theories (adaptive, situational, and behavioral). Table 1 shows the frequency of the three leadership approaches/theories and subthemes.

Table 1: Leadership Theories/Approaches in the Universities' Statements Dealing With COVID-19

Leadership Theory/Approach	Frequency	Percentage
Adaptive Leadership Theory	88	21
Situational Challenges	32	
Leader Behavior	19	
Adaptive Work	37	
Situational Leadership Theory	209	50
Telling	102	
Selling	35	
Participating	48	
Delegating	24	
Behavioral Theories of Leadership	123	29
Task-Oriented Behaviors	59	
Relationship Behaviors	64	

Prominent Leadership Theory in Responses to Crisis (Research Question 2)

Situational leadership was the predominant approach, garnering 50% of the descriptions collected from the statements. The leadership responses utilized situational leadership for communications. Situational leadership was highlighted in

the responses as communications updated followers and stakeholders while adapting the messaging to fit the current situation. With situations being unique and significant, the messages shifted and adapted by analyzing followers' needs and formulating the best responses at the time. Leaders should act, be decisive, and adapt decisions and messages to suit the needs of a situation to have greater success in weathering a crisis than those who choose to wait and not act (Boin et al., 2016).

Situational leadership theory focuses on the joint function of leader behavior and situational requirements. The messages should display support as well as use directiveness and monitoring to emphasize task accomplishment and social relationships (Blanchard et al, 2013). The following excerpts from the universities' statements support the findings of situational leadership with a focus on both task accomplishment and supportive social relationships:

- "These events are devastating in that they impact the lives . . . in a very negative way and cut deep into the fabric of supporting our success."
- "I specifically want to express my sincere appreciation to all of the members for your extraordinary efforts to prepare a safe and welcoming environment."
- "I am issuing a presidential directive that no one physically works on our campus unless they are requested to do so by an appropriate supervisor."

Like situational leadership, behavioral approaches were predominant in the statements with 29% of the descriptions connected to the task-oriented and relationship behaviors associated with behavioral leadership theory. In behavioral theory, leader behaviors were considered to be task oriented when the statements highlighted structure and directive messages. The relationship behaviors were identified in the statements that highlighted empowerment, participative leadership, and servant leadership (DeRue et al., 2011). The following excerpts from the statements are indicative of behavioral leadership:

- "With confirmation of COVID-19 cases, we are proactively taking steps immediately to protect the health and well-being of students and employees."

- "As of today, the decision has been made to extend remote instruction through the end of the spring semester. This is in line with nearly every other state institution and will provide clarity on expectations going forward."

- "I know that some of you may be feeling isolated and some of you may have questions, concerns, and thoughts about your university and our future. And I want you to know that I am here for you."

Adaptive leadership was also found in 21% of the descriptions. Adaptive leadership is similar to situational leadership in that messages or actions are flexible and adaptive to changing behavior. Adaptive leadership is becoming most important for leaders as the pace of change organizations face is becoming more rapid (Burke & Cooper, 2004). Aligned with contingency theories, the common assumption with adaptive leadership is that the environment supplies the variation to which leaders must adapt, and the variation is exogenous to the leadership process (DeRue, 2011). Adaptive leadership focuses more on a leader's relationship with the contextual environment and how the leader changes in response to interactions with the environment (Glover et al., 2002). Following Heifetz et al.'s (2004) definition of *adaptive leadership,* which stressed that leadership is the "activity of mobilizing people to tackle the toughest problems and do adaptive work necessary to achieve progress" (24), the following excerpts highlight adaptive leadership:

- "Leadership has been working to determine the best path forward to provide services while also prioritizing the health and wellbeing of all."

- "We understand that this could be especially challenging for different programs. . . . We are prepared to accommodate our students and to find effective and appropriate alternatives."

- "Senior leaders are thoughtfully working through possible solutions, and we will provide an update to our community tomorrow with next steps."

Subthemes of Leadership Theories (Research Question 3)
Within the three leadership theories and approaches found in the analysis of the statements, subthemes emerged related to each theory or approach. In situational

leadership, the model developed by Blanchard et al. (1993, 2013) with quadrants identified as telling, selling, participating, and delegating was identified in the statements. The telling quadrant focused on giving instructions, such as "employees whose pay is reduced will very likely be eligible for unemployment compensation. The university has developed a website with detailed information to assist affected employees relevant to unemployment processes." The selling quadrant focused on explaining decisions made by leaders, such as "as we look to next year the financial uncertainties presented by COVID-19 circumstances have exacerbated the existing financial challenges faced. We must prepare for the economic impact of the pandemic." The participating quadrant encouraged idea-sharing, such as:

> I want to remind you that this is an evolving situation, so I ask that we all be patient, flexible, tolerant, and most importantly kind to one another. We need everyone's help to beat this virus. We continue to ask for and identify solutions to help our community make meaningful connections and develop a sense of belonging.

The delegating quadrant is where the leader turned decisions over to followers. The following excerpt is indicative of delegating:

I want to thank each and every one of the over 300 members who elected to participate in the reduction of hours through the end of July. Your personal commitment of supporting the university during this time is sincerely appreciated.

The behavioral approach posits that leadership actions occur on a task-oriented level and a relationship level (Northouse, 2019). A leadership response may be more task oriented when focused on being directive and structured (DeRue et al., 2011), as in this excerpt: "If you plan on returning to work on campus, you must email your supervisor to inform them of any recent travels and potentially explore options as appropriate for an alternative work arrangement." Relationship-level responses focus more on being participative and empowering (DeRue et al., 2011) as in this excerpt: "Please rest assured, we fully understand during this time that your personal well-being and your ability to care for anyone counting on you is critical. We strive to be flexible and responsive to your needs."

Adaptive leadership is a complex process that includes situational challenges, leader behaviors, and adaptive work (Heifetz et al., 2009). Situational challenges were identified in the statements as technical and adaptive challenges and solely adaptive challenges. This excerpt supports the finding of situational challenges in the statements: "We know these decisions create complicated inconveniences. The many details surrounding these decisions are currently being discussed by the university; more information and direction will be communicated as soon as possible."

Leader behaviors in adaptive leadership are general prescriptions for helping confront difficult challenges and the changes that will result from them. Leader behaviors should provide direction, protection, orientation, conflict management, and productive norms in their messages or responses (Northouse, 2019), such as: "We are asking supervisors to offer flexibility to employees who are sick, have respiratory issues, or who need to care for family members who are ill."

Adaptive work is the final subtheme within adaptive leadership. Adaptive work is a communication process between leaders and followers where changes in roles, priorities, and values are confronted (Northouse, 2019), such as in this excerpt: "We will be ready and, importantly, we will have the flexibility in place to make any necessary changes should the situation change. We ask and expect the cooperation of every individual to create a safe campus."

Table 2 summarizes the leadership theories and approaches along with the subthemes and exemplary excerpts that support the findings.

Table 2: Leadership Theories/Approaches and Subthemes in Statements Dealing With COVID-19

Leadership Theory/ Approach	Subthemes	Exemplary Quotes
Adaptive Leadership Theory	Situational Challenges	"This type of developing situation will no doubt leave you with more questions than answers."
	Leader Behavior	"This is an unprecedented circumstance that is understandable, causing concern and anxiety for each member of our community. We are here to support you."
	Adaptive Work	"Now comes the challenging work to determine the appropriate actions to take next. Our goal is to meet the needs of our students, faculty, and staff who have responsibilities in the community and school, as well as respect those who do not."
Situational Leadership Theory	Telling	"So we can determine the full picture of how we may move forward for next year's budget; I have asked supervisors to perform a budget planning exercise. . . . You need to understand that we must begin collecting this data to inform decisions if necessary."
	Selling	"Thank you for everything all of you are doing as we navigate these uncertain times. This is a difficult situation for all of us. We have been through a number of tough years and resilience remains the key to our success."
	Participating	"I want to applaud everyone's ingenuity, flexibility, and resilience. I cannot thank you enough for all you are doing to care for each other."
	Delegating	"As you are aware, we are still in the middle of a stressful situation, filled with uncertainty and worry. I ask that you support and check on your friends and co-workers regularly."
Behavioral Theories of Leadership	Task-Oriented Behaviors	"Supervisors will have employees report in person only for duties that are necessary to continue operations in this interim period. Exceptions should only be made in rare cases. This directive is for every employee."
	Relationship Behaviors	"I value each one of you and think about you every day. I hope you and your families are both healthy and safe. I want to thank you again for everything you are doing for each other during the disruptions caused by this global pandemic."

In the content analysis of the statements, situational leadership, behavioral leadership approaches, and adaptive leadership were found to be the emergent

and predominant foundations to the leadership messages and communications at the beginning of the COVID-19 disruption. Understanding how these leadership theories and approaches are utilized in statements and communications has implications for follower responses to disruptions and organizations' continued productivity and performance. Implications from the findings are discussed in the following section.

Discussion

Sound communication with both a sense of urgency and concern allowed institutional leaders to convey valuable information in a manner that is situated within constructs of leadership theory. The statements from institutional leaders analyzed in this study were frequent and directive, yet came from a place of care for the well-being of the campus and its community constituents. Given the analyzed communication was from earlier in the COVID-19 pandemic response, one of the broad characteristics that were evident across messages was the level of transparency within these communication efforts.

The findings indicated prominent levels of situational leadership communication coupled with transparency and appreciation, a fitting communication known to resonate with stakeholders (Ahern & Loh, 2020; Davis & Gardner, 2012; Insch et al., 1997). Leader statements acknowledging their navigation of unfamiliar events and situations in the "telling" and "selling" domains were direct and accurately conveyed the seriousness of the COVID-19 event to the public (Blanchard et al., 1993, 2013). Situational communication often focused on the immediacy of COVID-19 pandemic efforts and actions oriented to the beneficiaries of what was being conveyed. In such an undefined time, situational communication was offered to ease uncertainty and ambiguity.

Adaptive leadership communication, with careful attention to direction and protection, was evident in leadership responses. The adaptive leadership communication not only provided insight into institutional challenges because of COVID-19, but situated constituent (staff, faculty, student, and community member) behavioral response as adaptive leadership in action in addressing such challenges.

This finding of adaptive leadership offered a unique evaluation, not only of communication efforts, but of how institutional leaders positioned people and organizations globally as the true actors of leadership in an ever-evolving situation.

Situational leadership emerged most frequently in the leadership statements and institutional responses, undoubtedly resulting from the urgent and contingent nature of the COVID-19 pandemic. Organizational leaders communicating from a situational leadership perspective were able to connect the decisive actions that objectively focused on and honored stakeholder relationships and community safety. Supportive and appreciative tones within leaders' statements provided stakeholder reactions suitable to the variety of perspectives evaluating the leader responses. With more than 50% of included communication containing situational leadership aspects, institutional leaders enacted situational communication styles as they processed the plight and pondered how to strategically communicate to their constituencies (Davis & Gardner, 2012).

Implications

When a shock, crisis, and/or disruption occurs, a successful leader must be decisive and focus on the problem (Grint, 2005). The situation needs to be actively constructed through communication as depicted by the frequency of such findings in this study. Leadership involves the ability to make sense of a phenomenon in a way that is co-constructed by those being led, which is consistent with proactive leadership. A leader must not only consider what the situation is but how it is situated as part of their communications (Grint, 2005). Effective leadership in times of crisis and shock goes beyond delivering the most appropriate and timely response; leaders must appreciate the diverse needs of stakeholders and lead with integrity throughout the entire shock—before, during, and after (Gigliotti & Fortunato, 2017).

The research findings provided evidence of the prominent leadership theories and approaches encountered by leaders in times of adversity and disruption. Situational, behavioral, and adaptive leadership approaches were most prevalent in the leadership decision-making, communication, and behaviors that primarily contributed to how stakeholders perceived leadership strategies and actions. In

their study on behavioral leadership, Martin et al. (2012) noted that no matter the occurrence, a situational element is more impactful to effectiveness than a leader's traits or skills. In other words, a situation tends to decide a leader's behavior and communication mode versus his or her charisma and ability to be transformative. The nature of the situational event creates the space for a leader's behavior, traits, and skills to be aroused, which was prevalent in the findings for this study.

Critics of situational, behavioral, and adaptive leadership theories note the ambiguity in conceptualizing a follower's commitment to the approaches. Hersey and Blanchard (1969), early researchers and authors of the situational leadership model, defined four levels of follower commitment to a leader's situational action as unwilling and unable (Level 1), willing and unable (Level 2), unwilling and able (Level 3), and willing and able (Level 4). The four levels can also be applied to a leader's behavior and adaptability within a situation to draw follower commitment. Though followers' actions were not a part of this research, the findings in the study indicated that the leadership communication and institutional responses offered levels of commitment to be considered by the followers in all three approaches; especially since federal mandates from the crisis required followers to commit to leadership messaging and their safety and well-being. Situational leadership was evident in the greatest number of statements that leaders used to inform and draw commitment from followers, which is fitting for quick responsiveness in pandemic-level occurrences (Thompson & Glasø, 2015). The swift responses to tasks and security of relationships noted in the behavioral and adaptive leadership approaches also proved to be more appropriate than the longevity of time and energy leaders invest in transformational and charismatic leadership modes (Toader & Howe, 2021).

Additionally, complex organizations, such as the universities in this study's sample, are interdependent, and the impact of the exogenous shock demands leaders' attention on all aspects of the organization. While it is often a natural tendency to focus on a unit or department the leader may be associated with or most familiar with, the findings from this study suggest that the disruption from the shock has a cascading impact across all of the units or divisions of the

organization. By adopting an organizational lens, leaders can better contend with the interdependent complexities of exogenous shocks on the organization.

When disruption from exogenous shock happens, stakeholders look to leaders for guidance, hope, and a sense of security. Leaders play an integral role in managing meaning during a crisis or disruption (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). In the findings of the study, communications were focused on providing the meaning of the situation and status of the organization to the many stakeholders. Stakeholders want to hear from the leaders to feel comfortable and safe as well as be informed of the status of the organization. Leaders hold a great deal of responsibility for the well-being of the organization and the stakeholders during a time when emotions are heightened and expectations are raised, which requires the leader to orient the internal and external stakeholders through communication and then action.

Limitations

Although the present study provides insights into leadership approaches to exogenous shocks in organizations as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, this study contains some limitations due to its scope. The sample used in this study, while complex organizations, was limited to universities. While universities as organizations often encompass many types of organizations, it is still limited to one sector or industry. Using the statements from the organizations also creates limitations as the results represent only a snapshot of what is present at that one time. It is possible that more statements were made that were not available for this study.

Future Research

Continued study may build upon the concepts, claims, and findings from this study. In response to the sample's limitations, the same approach should be used in different organizational sectors to understand the influence of organizational type on leaders' communications and responses to exogenous shocks. Future scholarship may further explore the various exogenous shocks beyond the COVID-19 pandemic to continue to understand how leaders respond and communicate during disruptions and crises. Finally, the perspectives of the stakeholders on the

effectiveness of leaders' communication would also be useful to better understand the impact and effectiveness of leaders during times of disruption.

Conclusion

Humans experiencing adverse and extreme changes that seem instant must process the reality of the change before they can fully accept that something new and negative is drastically changing their lives and lifestyles (Ahern & Loh, 2020). This study aimed to use content analysis to deeply probe leaders' communication and responses to the COVID-19-exogenous shock. The findings in this study indicated that situational, adaptive, and behavioral leadership theories framed the content and context of what the leaders conveyed to their constituencies. The usefulness of the findings is in validating and chronicling the prominent leadership theories in leaders' crisis communication that promote resilience and recovery during exogenous shocks.

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