

Adapt or Die

Leadership Resilience during Crisis

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Abstract—The aim of the present paper is to uncover and illustrate how leaders are managing the COVID-19 crisis and how they exercise resilience in their daily leadership practices. The hospitality industry is the context of the study. This study has used a qualitative, longitudinal research approach. In total, 35 interviews with 10 managers in five hotel organizations have been conducted throughout 2020–2022. Furthermore, 70 hours of workplace observations have been conducted. The study illustrates that the leadership practices were related to three themes: (i) responding to the crisis, (ii) persistent adaption and (iii) learning during and from the crisis. The result shed light on the idea that the leadership practices were a balancing act of moving between emotional and rational decisions. The study also illustrated how the managers' learning processes emerged from these practices of resilience as the managers continually were exposed to situations they had not experienced before and needed to manage in order for their firms to survive.

Keywords—leadership-in-practice, resilience, crisis, hospitality, learning

1 Introduction

As the global COVID-19 pandemic spread, the world's economy was suddenly shut down, due to the restrictions on social distancing. Crises and disasters happening to individuals, organizations or societies call for leadership that constructs resilience in the face of danger [1]. Resilience is often discussed as the ability to bounce back from difficulties, frustration and misfortunes. These are abilities that previous research has pointed out as vital for the effective leader [2]. It is safe to say that, due to the recurrent rapid changes happening in the business environment, as well as in society as a whole,—e.g., the responses to the COVID-19 pandemic—the understanding of resilience and leadership is more relevant than ever [2, 3]. Resilient leadership has recently gained increased interest from scholars [4] and refers to a management approach that supports organizations to survive and fulfill their obligations during difficult times. In recent calls for research, scholars have emphasized the need for a better understanding of the relation between resilience leadership practices and learning for organizations to survive [5, 6]. The COVID-19 pandemic has particularly hit

service industries like the hospitality industry hard due to stay-at-home orders, travel restrictions and social distancing. Almost overnight, the hotels lost as much as 99% [7] of their bookings, faced huge financial losses and went into crisis mode. Consequently, hotel organizations are faced with the ongoing consequences from the crisis. It is safe to say that the COVID-19 crisis has generated an exceedingly uncertain future for the hospitality industry, forcing it to reinvent itself to survive [6, 8, 10]. Resilience can be defined as “the capacity of a system (individual or complex) to change, adapt and regenerate in the face of adversity” [9]. Giustiniano et al. [1] describe it this way: “The guiding thread of resilient leadership is the talent for balancing responses to contradictory forces that present themselves as non-alternatives during periods of high ambiguity.” Disruptive events such as terrorism, natural disasters and war have been widely studied in management research [11]. However, these studies have mainly focused on a macro-perspective rather than a micro level that includes management and leadership during crisis [6, 11, 12]. As expected, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused a flood of studies in hospitality and tourism. Many of them take an exploratory stance and withhold parallels with previous political and economic crises [12]. Furthermore, most of these studies are snapshots in time and focus on macro-level research, and only a few have explored how leaders and managers in the hotel industry are managing the crisis—e.g., their strategies and actions over time [11]. Interestingly, researchers have discussed that, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, leadership theory and practice is also in crisis [13–15] and challenges existing business research [16]. This is because existing leadership theories offer little help when analyzing environments of uncertainty—e.g., crisis or disaster. In the present study, leadership practices in context of hospitality are studied. In addition, recent research emphasizes that previous studies on leadership in hospitality have included little longitudinal-based content [17]. Recent research [18] argues that how leaders practice resilience is empirically underexplored and argues that leaders’ capabilities to handle crisis and other unforeseen events such as the pandemic are the result of a “complex holistic process and requires a more comprehensive understanding of how it unfolds in context and in relation.” Given the little research on the micro level and leadership during crisis in general, and in the hospitality industry in particular [8], and the contemporary importance of the topic [19, 20], the aim of the present paper is to study how managers in the hotel industry are practicing leadership resilience during COVID-19 in their daily work practices. The following research question is asked: *How do managers in the hotel industry practice resilience in their daily work practices during the COVID-19 crisis?* To answer this question, the present study uses the theoretical concept of resilience [2], which is understood as the ability to withstand a disruption or disruptions and recover performance [21]. The present study takes a qualitative, longitudinal method approach to develop an understanding of leadership in the context of hospitality during crisis and, hence, fill a gap in the crisis leadership literature. This study explores leadership during crisis using in-depth qualitative interviews, as well as workplace observations and shadowing of leaders in their daily work practices.

2 Theoretical framework

2.1 Leadership-as-practice

In the last decade, there has been an increased awareness in studying leadership from a practice perspective [22, 23]. Due to the enhanced interest, leadership-as-practice has been viewed as a new “movement” [24]. By taking this stance, the present paper understands “practice” as “a coordinative effort among participants who choose through their own rules to achieve a distinctive outcome” [24]. Therefore, studies using the perspective of leadership-as-practice differ from more traditional ways of studying leadership, as they do not rely on the characteristics of individual leaders or focus on the relationship between leaders and followers. Instead, they focus on illustrating essential collective action evolving from patterns over time among those involved in the practice. Schatzki et al. [24] discuss practices as “embodied, materially mediated arrays of human activity centrally organized around shared practical understandings.” In the present paper, leadership is viewed as a socially constructed phenomenon that is being reproduced in everyday situations in organizations [26]. This involves a process described by ref. [27] as “the meanings involved become embedded as routines and makes it unnecessary for each situation to be defined anew, step by step”—everyday leadership practices, or what leaders essentially do [24], “how they do it, when they do it and why they decide do it” [28]. Here, leadership is viewed as evolving and unfolding in “moment-by-moment production of direction” [29]. By viewing leadership from this stance, it is also possible to empathize the context in which the leaders are active. This is relevant, especially in times of crisis, as the context legitimize the leadership practices [30].

2.2 Resilience and leadership

Earlier research illustrates that there is a direct relationship between the pressure of the leader’s work tasks and their capability to preserve resilience in the face of persistent management of complications [21, 31, 32]. Researchers also discuss that individuals that are resilient have a clear view of reality: they recognize the nature of events, without denial of its actual effects [3]. This also includes having the skill to interpret and assess data and information in order to take appropriate actions. For example, Kohli and Jaworski [33] discuss that organizational resilience includes the use of information in two sets of activities: response and execution of response. Similarly, researchers have discussed that there are two dimensions of organizational resilience—planned and adaptive [34]. Planned resilience is related to crisis management, or planned before the crisis evolves, while adaptive resilience appears after the crisis has happened [35]. Furthermore, researchers point out that acceptance is a part of resilience because critical circumstances have a tendency to overturn values and beliefs, because the “normal” is drastically changed [36]. Acceptance of the “new normal” is, therefore, necessary to survive a crisis. By accepting the new normal, individuals can reframe the new situation and, therefore, adapt to a critical event or situation [9]. According to Brown et al. [37] resilience involves ongoing learning, flexibility and adaptation.

A wide stream of research has studied resilience as a personal characteristic, often referred to as “resiliency.” These studies tend to take a static perspective on the resilience among individuals or organizations [38]. In contrast, in the present paper, leadership resilience is viewed as a process, rather than static individual characteristics, that can help individuals and organizations to learn over time. King and Rothstein [39] exemplify this by saying: “resilience is about how a person weathers a storm and the learning that results, how he or she deals with a major loss, and the processes that lead to personal choices ... and personal growth and integrity.” When studying resilience as a process, scholars describe it as being composed of two different but nonetheless interconnected dimensions: adaptive and reactive resilience [1].

3 Research methodology

Given the unique circumstances that the COVID-19 crisis created in the hotel industry, this study has used a qualitative, longitudinal research approach. Interpretive case study research seeks to understand both the context and process of the studied phenomena [40]. The method was chosen due to the study’s social constructivism stance [41]. In the present study, leadership is viewed as a social construct negotiated by individuals. Furthermore, the study takes the analytical perspective of leadership-as-practice and, hence, emphasizes that leadership is more about what individuals in an organization accomplish together than about what “one person thinks or does” [22]. As argued by Nolan and Garavan, the value of viewing leadership in this way is that it focuses on actual practices: “what is done in relation to leadership, work, strategy, organizing by people in complex and open circumstances” [42]. Moreover, the present study is concerned with “how leadership emerges and unfolds through day-to-day experience” [22] and to uncover leadership practices in contexts in which it is occurring [43]. By doing so, the present study focuses on the practices of leaders in relation to crisis and resilience over time.

3.1 Data collection

The main source of data is interviews with hotel managers. In total, 35 interviews with 10 managers in five hotel organizations located in Denmark, Sweden and Norway have been conducted from February 2020 to March 2022. Due to the travel restrictions induced by the pandemic, 10 of the interviews have been conducted over Zoom. The interviews lasted about 90–120 minutes and were all recorded and transcribed. Following the aim of the study to explore a totally new phenomenon—i.e., resilience in leadership during the COVID-19 crisis—in-depth interviews were conducted [44]. This method allowed the respondents to address their experiences of leadership both before and during COVID-19 freely. The research questions were related to their roles as managers in the hotel industry and the practices related to it. When the COVID-19 crisis broke out, the questions were more focused on managing the crisis and reflections about the respondents’ role as leader in a crisis.

This research has been designed with leadership and learning as the unit of analysis. Because the research conducted in this study is based on practice, it takes the nature of

practice as its central focus. This allows for actions to be observed but also for awareness of how the context shapes individual action [45]. Therefore, workplace observations have been conducted where the researcher has participated—e.g., in meetings and in everyday activities at the hotel.

3.2 Analysis

The data in this study were analyzed in four steps. In the first step, the interview data were read several times; thereafter, it was organized and categorized in tandem with the data collection. By doing so, the author developed a sensemaking in relation to the studied phenomena and the context of the study [46]. Thereafter, the data were coded with open coding, and critical events and practices from the respondents' narratives were analyzed. In this part of the process, a timeline was put together, deriving from critical events described in the narratives [47]. Furthermore, actions and interactions related to “doing” leadership, describing changes caused by the pandemic crisis, were identified. Thereafter, recurring categories could be identified and grouped into categories. The first-order categories refer to leadership practices during crises. The data reveal that the respondents took actions in several ways to manage the crisis and also to lead their co-workers during uncertain times. Third, the first-order categories were re-coded by using the method of axial coding; the first-order categories were examined to find connections and dissimilarities among them. This part of the process helped to reduce the categories into a more concentrated number of second-order categories. In this stage, the data were analyzed by iteratively moving between the data and the relevant literature [45]. Hence, this analytical phase was guided by a set of concepts from the concepts of “resilience” and “learning”; the concepts related to *responses*, *adaption* and *learning* [48] were used and guided the final categorization.

4 Findings

4.1 Responding to the chaos

The data illustrate that, when the COVID-19 pandemic began, it created a shock that was followed by chaos within the hotel organizations. The managers describe a state of extreme uncertainty in many areas of life such as at work, in their private lives, and in society as a whole. Almost all hotel bookings were canceled overnight, leaving a sense of disaster or, as put by one of the managers, “as a third world war.” All managers responded similarly in the first phase of the pandemic. Their daily work practices were focused on almost a constant state of communication. The managers describe that they tried to balance fact and emotions. On one hand, they had responsibilities concerning the hotels finances, and on the other hand, they wanted to calm their employees and create stability for them—a task that by many managers was described as “a mission impossible.” This is illustrated in the following quote:

I took a decision to act as I did when I was in the army. I focused on actions and on organizing my forces. For me, that meant that we had meetings at the same

time every day, that I checked in on people at night if I knew that they were in a bad state and that we repeated these procedures over and over in order to create a sense of stability.

The managers' narratives illustrate that the pandemic struck hard against the hospitality industry in a very short period of time and created an extreme loss in income, sometimes up to 95%. The managers describe that they found it very hard to practice leadership, as they did not have any more answers or information about the future than their employees. However, all managers felt responsible for creating actions in order to respond to the crisis. They rapidly permitted large parts of their staff, sometimes up to 70%. Furthermore, they tried to implement and respond to new safety restrictions such as social distancing and to create a safe stay for the guests, as well as a safe workplace for their employees. In practice, the managers learned to shift between doing long-term (or at least as long-term as possible) planning—e.g., trying to interpret guests' intentions to book their summer holiday—as well as very short-term strategies, such as responding to rapid changes—e.g., concerning social distancing. In practice this led to managers sometimes breaking down the planning to a day-to-day practice.

4.2 Persistent adaption

The data illustrate that the pandemic was different from earlier crises that the managers experienced. The pandemic has kept going for over two years, which has put the managers and the hotel employees in a state of crisis and uncertainty for a long period of time. Due to the fact that the pandemic was worldwide and created a need for social distancing, the hotel industry was severely damaged. The managers describe the COVID-19 pandemic as a constant process of change. However, they emphasize that the process of change often felt unnecessary and very unmotivated, because everyone knew that there would soon be new restrictions. One of the managers said, "*I just felt that I had no choice to keep trying. It was adapt or die*". A vital task for the managers was to stop focusing on the future and live in the moment; it was important for them to focus on what happened in the hotel from day to day and to motivate their employees to make the best of the current situation. The following quote is an illustrative example of this: *We were like puppets, hanging from strings and dancing or laying down when the government pulled our strings. Can you imagine the frustration? There has merely been one week of stability and of course it is exhausting, but what is the alternative?* The narratives also describe that the managers practice resilience by acting as good examples and, hence, leading the way for their employees. By behaving in a certain way, the managers pointed out the way for other actors in the organization. For example, all hotels had to cut down on their staff, but the services they provided were still the same. In practice, this meant that all employees had to work with new tasks and were required to be extremely flexible, both in working hours as well as work tasks. All interviewed managers emphasized the importance of being able to adapt and learn new tasks in times of crisis. The following quote illustrates the way in which one manager described this leadership behavior:

I have shown my employees that, in times like this, there is no other alternative than to cooperate and make the best of things. I have worked in the reception, served breakfast and even cleaned some rooms. One of the first things I said to them [co-workers] was that no one works from home. You all need to be here and to be available wherever you are needed. ...Make yourself useful... if you are going to your office and see a guest who needs help, help them! If you see a bottle standing on a table, pick it up! Even if it's not your usual job, you must view it as your job now.

The managers practiced resilience by emphasizing the necessity of solving the problem or surviving the crisis as a team. This approach also revealed itself through actions such as giving the co-workers a mandate to make more decisions and, hence, to empower them. The focus was put on working together to solve a range of smaller problems to survive the pandemic.

4.3 Learning during and from crisis

The crisis led to the hotel organizations being reorganized and shifting focus in many ways. For example, business models were changed, and the offers that the hotels made were in many ways different than before the pandemic. The managers explain that they needed to approach new customer segments such as families in order to survive. This led to new ways of organizing the hotels, but also finding new services to offer. Furthermore, due to a reduced workforce and lack of employees with experience and expertise, the managers had to rearrange their entire organization. These rearrangements revealed blind spots that the managers had not paid attention to before. One of them reflects by saying: *I remember thinking that I have worked here [at the hotel] for 15 years, but I have never seen this [how the hotel organizes breakfast] before. Why do we organize the breakfast like this? It is so complicated, and I don't think it works very well. I have not seen this before because I did not have to and believe me when I say that I feel a bit ashamed.* The data reveal that the managers reflected upon the changes and challenges induced by the pandemic crisis. Over time, they felt that they had the chance to learn more about their organizations and to gain more insight into specific parts of it, giving them an opportunity to understand the whole organization better. Hence, the pandemic gave the managers an opportunity to view the organization from a distance and to focus on micro processes and practices. During these processes, the data show that learning occurred. For example, managers started to question assumptions about procedures and routines, and they dismissed them as a part of their organizational culture and “that we have always done it this way but that does not mean that it's the right way to do it.” Overall, this shows that the managers also viewed the crisis as an opportunity to make a change and change their mindset in order to improve the organization.

5 Discussion

5.1 Theoretical contributions

The findings in this study emerge from the analysis of the research question on how managers in the hotel industry practiced resilience in their leadership during the COVID-19 crisis and the learning outcomes related to these practices. The study contributes to theory by moving beyond the macro-level research, focusing on leadership practices on a micro level [6, 11]. Also, this study focuses on emergent resilience in leadership rather than planned reactions to crisis [5] and views it as a process rather than being static [25]. Early results from studies focusing on the COVID-19 crisis related to tourism and hospitality [35] stated that the crisis challenges the industry's working norms and increases innovation related to surviving the crisis while also reshaping the entire industry [7]. Hence, the present paper responds to the call for more research on leadership during crisis in the hospitality industry [17] that goes beyond planned crisis management and focuses on the responses to crisis [12] and the transformation of the industry that will lead to a new normal. The practices of resilient leadership that were identified in the present study contribute to the literature on leadership-in-practice and resilience that is a response to crisis. First, the leadership resilience practices were closely related to the managers' ability to interpret and assess data coming from governments and, thereafter, take appropriate actions. This also involves practices of responding to the new situations [48]. Second, the leadership resilience practices concerned creating a meaning and sense to the persistent changes [37]. The efforts in resilience in leadership practices were very much a paradoxical process, which also confirms the discussions on resilience during crisis by Giustiniano et al. [1] and Lombardi et al. [18]. In practice, that meant learning to reinvent the meaning of hospitality but also learn to quickly adapt [48] to new customers' needs and to restrictions. This involved a balancing act of trying to survive during the difficult times [5], which involved financial decisions such as permitting staff, as well as motivational decisions, to motivate the remaining employees. Third, the study shed light on the managers "moment-by-moment" production of direction in order to withstand and recover from the long-lasting crisis. This involved moving from small scale practices on a day-to-day basis to creating a more overall view of how to manage the crisis. The study shed light on the learning outcomes that were created in the cross-section when the managers moved between small- and large-scale perspectives [5, 18]. Evidently, learning processes emerged from these practices of resilience as the leaders were exposed to situations and practices they had not experienced before [37]. Hence, the theoretical contributions in the present study move beyond planned crisis management and focus on adaption and learning during the ongoing crisis.

5.2 Practical contributions

The findings in this study offer valuable insights to managers in organizations, in general, and in the hospitality industry, in particular. Unlike earlier crises [11], the

COVID-19 pandemic has put the world and the hospitality industry in a long-lasting crisis mode, and we still haven't seen the end of it. Recent research [7] points out that the aftermath of the crisis will surely rearrange the hospitality industry and that those working in it will see a "new normal" that does not follow the earlier procedures of the industry. Hence, managers must organize, as well as create the possibility of learning new ways of working that are more flexible and adaptable. This, for example, involves having a staff that has both the skills and flexibility to move between several work tasks when necessary. Furthermore, hotel organizations will need to be able to move from a larger capacity to a smaller one due to new outbreaks of the pandemic and the potential need for social distancing to survive in the long-run.

5.3 Limitations and future research

The present study has been conducted during the pandemic. Future studies could also focus on a more longitudinal approach and investigate post-pandemic leadership practices. Furthermore, this study only involves managers and their perspective, but future studies could also include the perspective of "followers" in order to gain a more nuanced view of the pandemic and the resilience practiced over time. The perspectives of individual, group and organizational learning could also use some further investigation in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, not least to shed light on how organizations, both in the hospitality industry and in general, can prepare for future crises.

6 Conclusions

The aim of this study was to explore how leaders in the hotel industry practice resilience in dealing with the COVID-19 crisis in their daily work practices. The study illustrates that the leadership practices were related to three themes: (i) responding to the crisis, (ii) persistent adaptation and (iii) learning during and from crisis. The results shed light on that the leadership practices were a balancing act of moving between emotional and rational decisions. Furthermore, the leaders were forced to be flexible and to adapt quickly to societal demands, which resulted in leadership practices that interconnected a small and large perspective. The study also illustrated how learning processes emerged from these practices of resilience as the leaders persistently were exposed to situations they had not experienced before.

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