Transformational Leadership During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Strengthening Employee Engagement Through Internal Communication

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Abstract

This article examines the function of transformational leadership in enhancing employee engagement through internal communication during the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure the companies' sustainability. This article is based on semi-structured interviews with 16 informants (human resources department representatives and employees) from the four industries most impacted by the COVID-19 epidemic: travel, hotel, food and beverage, and retail sectors. The findings reveal that transformational leaders play a critical role in fighting the COVID-19 pandemic by encouraging employees to be innovative and creative, undertaking active actions, and strengthening employee engagement through internal communication. On the other hand, internal communication has changed due to the pandemic, including communication flow, messages, and media. Internal communication has promoted a climate for active communication behaviors encouraging knowledge sharing, collaboration, and creativity-enhancing employee engagement. Through spiritual values, transformational leaders who promote employee engagement amid this crisis ensure the organization's sustainability. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this research suggests that leaders might

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increase employee engagement by including spiritual values through internal communication.

Keywords

transformational leadership, internal communication, employee engagement, COVID-19 pandemic, organizational sustainability

Pandemic COVID-19 causes most governments to declare a state of emergency and impose lockdown protocols affecting all human life structures. Most people suffer from this situation. This pandemic then affects the global economic crisis. It encourages significant changes in many organizations (Joshi, 2020) since it presents unique challenges and brings uncertainty and unpredictability to most organizations (Santoso et al., 2021). This situation forces them to adopt a new culture of work.

The organization's business activities continue to operate even though sales drop dramatically in a matter of weeks due to being unprepared (Hudecheck et al., 2020). However, lockdown techniques have been widely adopted. The COVID-19 lockdowns have impacted four businesses: travel, hotel, food and beverage, and retail (The Jakarta Post, 2020). These industries struggle to exist while preserving their employees' health and safety as critical stakeholders (Gill, 2015). Thus, leaders of organizations play a pivotal role in creating a safe environment, connecting with employees, motivating them to understand their sentiments, and creating employee engagement.

Employee engagement impacts on improving employee and corporate outcomes. Some studies reveal that employee engagement can boost work happiness and loyalty (Kular et al., 2008; Lu et al., 2016). Employee engagement also brings impacts in a crisis because employees are brand ambassadors. They will speak positively about the companies to co-workers, potential employees, and customers (Van Rooy et al., 2011). Employee engagement is key to resolving the problem because they are emotionally, socially, and spiritually engaged to the aims and goals (Akhmetshin et al., 2019). Due to the crisis, employee engagement can improve the quality of relationships that can increase employee trust in the organization (Mazzei et al., 2012). Engaging them through efficient communication can help companies get the most outstanding results.

Applying transformational leadership is critical in strengthening employee engagement through internal communication during the COVID-19 pandemic. Studies reveal that transformational leadership can facilitate employee engagement, increase

productivity, and influence internal communication and employee relational satisfaction (Men, 2014; Mozammel & Haan, 2016). Anwar (2017) cited that transformational leadership is the best and most appropriate leadership style applied by companies when facing a crisis. This leadership style promotes and encourages innovation that becomes the fundamental change in the organization's sustainability.

While previous leadership research has emphasized the need for transformative leadership in normal times, less attention has been dedicated to transformational leadership in times of crisis, mainly due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which threatens business sustainability. Therefore, this situation necessitates immediate action by the leaders to respond to this uncertainty. On the other hand, effective leadership has long been regarded as the most critical mechanism for various companies, both in the normal situation and crisis (Anwar, 2017; Madanchian et al., 2017), since they must make crucial decisions and expect good results to achieve organizations' goals (Anwar, 2017).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the role of leaders is vital in strengthening employee engagement through internal communication to sustain the organizations, as these problems have yet to be studied, particularly in the relational dimension, in which leadership is a well-studied issue in organizational sciences. Employee engagement and internal communication are two recent additions. In light of this, this article seeks to explain how transformational leadership strengthens employee engagement through internal communication during the COVID-19 epidemic.

Literature Review

Transformational Leadership

Leadership is a fundamental aspect to achieving employee engagement (Popli & Rizvi, 2017), and it lies with the leaders influencing their followers to achieve the organization's goals. The leaders must play their strategic roles in boosting employee engagement by bringing happiness to work (Joo & Lee, 2017). They also establish and maintain a work environment and provide support whenever needed (Park et al., 2019). Therefore, leadership is one of the single most prominent elements contributing to workplace and workforce engagement perceptions. Besides, appropriate leadership styles become a crucial element to promote employee interactions and performance (Popli & Rizvi, 2015).

When leaders need to increase their employees' interest, awareness, and willing acceptance of new vision and mission for the good of the organization, transformational leadership is critical to help the organization redefine the mission and vision, renew the members' commitment, and reform the system to achieve their goal (Hay, 2006). Transformational leadership is defined as a style of leadership to organize relationships in facing the internal and external changes by motivating, enhancing, and transforming the employees' actions and aspirations and by integrating empathy, compassion, sensitivity, relationship building, and innovation so that the leader and the employees

have a shared vision and values, mutual respect, and trust (Jyoti & Dev, 2014; Men, 2014; Moyo, 2019).

Transformational leadership consists of four dimensions (Breevaart et al., 2013; Hay, 2006; Jyoti & Dev, 2014): (1) idealized influence, (2) inspirational motivation, (3) intellectual stimulation, and (4) individualized consideration. Idealized influence refers to charismatic vision and behavior to build confidence and trust and provide a role model to be followed by the employees. The charismatic character of the leadership should be supported by an inspirational motivation to make the employees commit to the leaders' vision. Furthermore, the leaders should encourage intellectual stimulation, such as innovation and creativity, to solve the problems. Regarding the employees' interests, the leaders must ensure their needs to be involved in the organization's transformational process. Combining the dimensions will create organizational performance beyond expectations (Hay, 2006).

Transformational leadership connects to other concepts, such as employee performance, employee creativity, work engagement, and organizational commitment and communication. Transformational leaders are critical to influencing employees' performance to decrease their turnover intention (Yücel, 2021). Transformational leadership is also critical to encourage employee creativity more effectively by creating an open climate for learning, innovation, and problem-solving (Jyoti & Dev, 2014). Transformational leadership influences employees' work engagement directly and indirectly (Breevaart et al., 2013) and their service orientation because they are more engaged if they perceive the transformational characteristic of their leaders (Popli & Rizvi, 2015). Transformational leadership has a critical role in increasing organizational commitment, and it will bring some benefits, such as improved employee performance, productivity, loyalty, responsibility, job satisfaction, motivation, and a harmonious industrial relations system (Almohtaseb et al., 2021; Moyo, 2019).

On the other hand, the transformational leadership style has been evaluated as an effective leadership style since it has a direct and strong ability to create a favorable work environment for higher employee engagement and higher service orientation (Popli & Rizvi, 2015). This style enables employees to understand better the organization's activities, support, care, and values contributing to connections with the organization's members and developing a high degree of affective commitment to the organization (Yücel, 2021). Moreover, transformational leadership can be a helpful tool for dealing with organizational crisis and management because it ensures job satisfaction and motivates employees to work well and effectively to achieve organizational goals (Almohtaseb et al., 2021).

Internal Communication and Crisis

Some research reports that internal communication plays an essential role in the organization (Meng & Berger, 2012; Thornton, 2018). It significantly influences employees' trust, satisfaction, commitment, loyalty (Asif & Sargeant, 2000; Mazzei, 2014; Pološki Vokić et al., 2020), employee participation, and job satisfaction (Ćorić et al.,

2020). Internal communication also encourages employee performance (Ćorić et al., 2020), strengthens employee commitment, promotes a positive sense of organizational belonging, develops employees' awareness of environmental change, and develops employees' understanding of the organization's needs (Mazzei, 2010; Welch & Jackson, 2007). Internal communication is operationally defined as an interactive sharing of information by using two-way communication energizing the employees' performance (Mazzei, 2014). Moreover, characteristically internal communication is dynamic and can perform in formal and informal communication (Asif & Sargeant, 2000; Ćorić et al., 2020).

Internal communications can be viewed as a form of relationship-building (Asif & Sargeant, 2000). By implementing two-way symmetrical internal communication, employees feel that they can express their thoughts (Mazzei, 2010; Sedej & Justinek, 2013), their voices are heard, and they are empowered (Pološki Vokić et al., 2020). Therefore, internal communication functions to maintain the relationship with internal stakeholders in the organization through sharing and receiving the information, including downward, upward, and horizontal communication (Ćorić et al., 2020), and communicative actions represent a behavioral outcome of loyalty (Mazzei, 2014).

Internal communication flow is critical since it keeps the business performance running well (Sedej & Justinek, 2013). This communication also contributes to organizational well-being, a collaborative environment, and organizational change (Mazzei, 2010). Thus, the organization has managed its internal communication channels to regularly disseminate messages to employees through websites, intranet, blogs, e-newsletters, meetings, and printed materials (Ingelmo Palomares et al., 2018). These channels have been effectively validated to build relationships with the employees (Ruck & Welch, 2012). Communication activities conducted through these platforms become essential aspects influencing internal communication quality (Ingelmo Palomares et al., 2018) since they provide new opportunities to share information and knowledge, build relationships, facilitate collaboration among employees, and interconnect among the employees (Sedej & Justinek, 2013).

Social media platforms, on the other hand, play essential roles in the organization. They provide a two-way symmetrical internal communication system (Ingelmo Palomares et al., 2018; Linke & Zerfass, 2011; Sedej & Justinek, 2013) and facilitate disseminating organizations' messages to the employees (Sedej & Justinek, 2013). Some studies reveal that the uses of social media platforms are to provide ongoing feedback to employees about individual and organizational issues, to ensure an adequate flow of information, and to meet employees' communication needs (Ingelmo Palomares et al., 2018). These platforms then become excellent instruments to develop the quality of internal communication, particularly during the crisis of the COVID-19 when people have to follow social distancing policy.

On the other hand, internal communication promotes a climate for active communication behaviors through knowledge sharing, collaboration, and creativity (Mazzei, 2010). This climate is largely shaped by the management and its employees (Parent

& Lovelace, 2018) through vision sharing (Asif & Sargeant, 2000). This climate critically makes the employees more engaged, positively influences work performance, and prepares the employees to adapt to changing environments (Parent & Lovelace, 2018). Therefore, the organization's support to the employees is crucial since they will find it easier to adapt to the changing environment (Nazir & Islam, 2017), and internal communication helps the employees adapt to the changes (Linke & Zerfass, 2011; Mazzei, 2010).

In facing the crisis, the employees can be mobilized as receivers of the messages and as senders. They can proactively act in dealing with the crisis (Frandsen & Johansen, 2011). Some reactions and feelings emotionally and cognitively may occur when the employees face the crisis, like the COVID-19 pandemic, such as the feeling of insecurity and uncertainty, chaos, stress, the feeling of betrayal, fear of losing the job, status, position, esteem, and good social network, and anger (Frandsen & Johansen, 2011). Therefore, the leaders can transparently communicate the organization's situation to directly get feedback from the employees. Then, the leaders can directly respond to the feedback. Therefore, both leaders and employees can listen to each other either using face-to-face or mediated communication (Ingelmo Palomares et al., 2018) to anticipate the development of communication problems since internal stakeholders may have different interests causing different responses (Ravazzani, 2016).

Employee Engagement

Employee engagement has an impact on the organization's sustainability. It becomes an essential factor to bring the organization's success (Popli & Rizvi, 2015) and sustainability (Saratun, 2016) since it leads to better financial performance and profitability (Suan Choo et al., 2013). Employee engagement significantly impacts employees' performance and commitment (Nazir & Islam, 2017). Therefore, to build impactful engagement, the employees should psychologically perceive that their works are meaningful, safe, and available (Popli & Rizvi, 2015) and feel that they are fully involved in their jobs of the organization so that they dedicate their efforts to the organization's success (Joo & Lee, 2017).

Employee engagement connected each other with spirit at work or workplace spirituality. Employee engagement helps to show the use of workplace spirituality which involves a feeling of being connected with one's work as well as with co-workers and others associated with work (Saks, 2011). Workplace spirituality can be defined as an experience of employees who feel passionate about and energized by their work, find meaning and purpose in their work, feel that they can express themselves thoroughly at work, and feel connected to those whom they work with (Kinjerski & Skrypnek, 2004).

The organization can strongly feel the importance of employee engagement when facing a crisis, for instance, the COVID-19 pandemic. Engaged employees are more motivated and productive. They could work above and beyond the organization's

expectations and get happiness in their work so that they are more active, approach-oriented, energetic, interested in their work, sympathetic to their colleagues, and persistent in the face of difficulties (Joo & Lee, 2017). Therefore, it is essential to enhance employee engagement by delivering motivating messages such as providing performance feedback, recognition, and appreciation to employees (Suan Choo et al., 2013).

Some studies revealed that internal communication becomes a critical factor in building employee engagement (Mishra et al., 2014; Pološki Vokic et al., 2020). Those studies also describe that employees experience higher levels of engagement when the organization effectively communicates with them. Therefore, the organization achieves success by improving internal communication by building engagement with the employees and ensuring that they understand its progress, achievement, and plans (Tomlinson, 2010). This engagement encourages their productivity and creativity of innovation (Pološki Vokic et al., 2020).

Research Methods

The case study was used in this research to achieve the objectives, and this method is the most appropriate method focusing on a particular way of defining cases. It focuses on a single example of a broader phenomenon (Gerring, 2004) and provides tools for researchers to study complex phenomena within their contexts (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

Sample

To get the holistic perspective of the organization, the informants of the current study covered both human resource officers and employees. The study's informants consist of 16 human resources officers and employees from the four most affected industries due to the COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia, such as travel, hotel, food and beverage, and retail sectors (The Jakarta Post, 2020). Although this study did not focus on one particular industry that could elicit deep exploration, those four different industries could capture the complexity of organizations' internal communication due to the pandemic in strengthening employee engagement applied by transformational leaders. Also, those various industries could enrich the realities the leaders and employees face during the pandemic, giving valuable lessons for organizational risk management.

In the recruitment process of selecting key informants, a purposive sampling approach was chosen by considering their experience and information-rich level. The industries that the researchers selected were asked to suggest potential informants representing the organizations who were seriously affected during the pandemic, such as salary cuts. However, they endure working in these industries. The informants who met the inclusion criteria were informed about the nature of the study and were asked their willingness before they were voluntarily interviewed. (Table 1)

Table 1. Informant Identity.

Informant	Organizational Sectors	Position
Informant 1	Travel	Human Resources
Informant 2	Travel	Employee
Informant 3	Hotel	Human Resources
Informant 4	Hotel	Employee
Informant 5	Hotel	Human Resources
Informant 6	Hotel	Employee
Informant 7	Retail	Human Resources
Informant 8	Retail	Employee
Informant 9	Hotel	Human Resources
Informant 10	Hotel	Employee
Informant 11	Food and Beverage	Human Resources
Informant 12	Food and Beverage	Employee
Informant 13	Travel	Human Resources
Informant 14	Travel	Employee
Informant 15	Hotel	Human Resources
Informant 16	Hotel	Employee

Source: (interview, 2020).

Data Collection

This study used a semi-structured interview to collect data. The open-ended questions allowed for considerable freedom in the sequencing and various responses from the informants (Marshall et al., 2015) to get informants' thoughts, insights, and perspectives from personal and sensitive issues. From July 14 to 30, 2020, the interview began with a social conversation to create an everyday situation. It then followed up with main questions to encourage informants to narratively share and describe their experiences and understanding of internal communication and employee engagement of the organizations they work at during the COVID-19 pandemic. The interview was conducted via WhatsApp call and Google Meet. It lasted between 24 to 57 min per informant, totaling 494 min or more than 8.2 h, with the average interview lasting approximately 31 min.

Data Analysis

After collecting the data, the researchers transcribed the recording of the interview. The transcripts were then carefully read while simultaneously listening to the interviews to ensure accuracy and a deep understanding of the interviews. The researchers employed the inductive thematic analysis to see how internal communication impacts employee engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic. Data coding resulted in 45 initial codes, all of which were relevant to the research question. Those codes clustered into four themes which were supported by textual descriptions from the transcription to provide examples. It was then inductively analyzed.

Results

Innovative and Creative Encouragement

The COVID-19 pandemic enforces changes in the organizations since external environments are changed. The leaders see this crisis as an opportunity to be innovative, supported by organizational culture. The innovation accommodates health protocols, and it aims to anticipate other changes and increase resilience in the face of uncertainty. The business can be sustainable only by doing innovation, and the employees become adaptive and productive.

> "Well, this internally becomes an opportunity to push us to change since external conditions also change. People, particularly young people, usually do anything online during this pandemic, which means we have to innovate in our business processes in line with our culture. It becomes a better innovation. We still have to be productive, meaning that the culture of productivity and quality must still be maintained even though conditions are limited. Then we must behave adaptively so that we can get through this pandemic while remaining productive". (Informant 7, human resource officer, retail industry)

To survive in this challenging time, the human resource officers and employees argued that the organization and its employees take this crisis as a challenge to adapt to this situation to keep surviving. The leaders should encourage members of the organization to be creative in maintaining their business performance, strengthening their organizational values in serving the customers, and deepening employees' relationships with their close people since they have more time with them during the quarantine.

> "This pandemic brings a new challenge for the tourism business because we have to think creatively to keep maintaining the best performance/target." (Informant 14, employee, travel industry).

> "[…] For the sake of customer satisfaction in the midst of the pandemic, we still have to serve the community, so it's an opportunity to serve the community. That's why we still have to operate." (Informant 7, human resource officer, retail industry)

Active Actions

Human resource officers believe that leadership plays a pivotal role in this uncertain time to overcome this challenging situation. Leaders convince the employees that there is hope behind the COVID-19 pandemic by emphasizing that they still have a chance to survive. This way can maximize trust and minimize employees' stress during this situation. Through the leaders, the organizations are forced to make decisions to save and maintain their business. The decisions directly impact the employees.

Therefore, the organizations' leaders consider making wise decisions that all stakeholders can accept, including the employees. They firmly take risks in making policies based on a deep understanding of the organization's situation and employees' experiences towards the COVID-19 pandemic.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the decisions that have been made consist of 1) compromising agreement on paying wages, 2) reducing salary because of reducing working hours and/or days, 3) offering more flexible working arrangements such as working from home, 4) mandating to observe strict health protocols and use energy effectively, 5) re-planning strategies to protect their businesses, and 6) laying off daily wage workers and employees with employment contract expired. The employees evaluate these new policies as good policies since they can still work at the organizations. Therefore, they are grateful for still having a job while other employees from other companies lay off to keep their business running.

On the other hand, maintaining the employees' spirit and commitment in this situation is critical. Human resource officers and employees opined that the leaders intensively communicate the situation with empathy, optimism, and motivation through some communication channels. These ways could energize the employees to keep working and check the availability of infrastructure of the organizations. Also, prioritizing the employees in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic is the first and foremost to sustain the business. When most organizations' adverse impacts of this pandemic started to be felt, laying off the employees was not the priority option. The organizations consider a humanitarian standpoint. Therefore, giving opportunities for the employees to keep working in the organizations save their family from food and home security and keep the business existence.

> "They appreciate it because, first, my company makes that layoff as the last option, unlike any other company. As seen, other companies did it, as soon as COVID appeared, hit, boomed, immediately layoff, that's it. In here, we really appreciate the people. […] What we can do first is to defend everything in our company, that's it" (Informant 14, employee, travel industry)

Furthermore, the role of the leaders is crucial to keep the organization surviving. They have to ensure the existence of the business of the organizations in this COVID-19 crisis. Therefore, to boost the spirit of the employees, the leaders enthusiastically provide confidence that if they can keep their performances up and maintain facilities supporting COVID-19 health protocols. When the situation becomes better in the future, the customers will return to the organization.

> "We keep trying to reassure them that for this time by maintaining the quality of our service, (we hope) surely sooner or later guests will come back to enjoy the facilities (in our hotel)." (Informant 9, human resource officer, hotel industry)

Strengthening Internal Communication

In this uncertain time, the organizations' leaders become open and transparent with the organization's condition. Leaders transparently communicate the situation of the organizations to strengthen employee trust. They communicate losses, new policies, and strategies in the face of the pandemic. They also welcome the employees if they would like to ask further about the organizations' situation. They are also readily available and help the employees by listening to their aspirations. They also build employee resilience by navigating the organization into the future.

> "Because the leaders are open, then employees (at our hotel) are more able to communicate with leaders and deliver their aspirations and ideas, the flow of communication that is intertwined becomes much better" […] "Leaders communicate openly and transparently, about what is going on in the company, and also how we step forward in responding to and addressing this pandemic" (Informant 9, human resource officer, hotel industry)

The organizations' leaders also need to maintain regular communication with the employees to provide every new policy, either from the organization or the government. The information consists of new typical policy from the government, operational procedures for the new normal, strategies and policies of the organization, and preventive measures against the COVID-19.

> "So, we always share everything. Whether it's the latest information from the government on the new normal, what the new normal's SOP (Standard Operational Procedure). From every department, it is about what to anticipate and what the rules that apply, for now, the policies of the company in the future after these conditions become better" (Informant 3, human resource officer, hotel industry)

Internal communication strengthens the relationships among the employees and promotes connectedness among employees and human solidarity. Solidarity is paramount to responding to the impact of this pandemic. It helps those exposed and positively infected COVID-19 decrease their burdens and not feel isolated.

> "At certain times, such as during the last Eid fasting, we had one activity [..], so that our friends exposed by virus and with positive status in stores did not feel alone. We paid special attention to them. It's also listed on our Instagram. That's to keep the employee's good engagement." (Informant 7, human resource officer, retail industry)

While the COVID-19 pandemic presents challenges to the organization to adjust to this situation, the internal communication is functioned to internalize optimistic values to the employees stay positive during the emotional disruption. Optimism is crucial to help the employees navigate this pandemic and encourage their spirit to maintain their performance. The employees also evaluated a reason why they work. They argued that

working is not just to earn money to fulfill their daily needs. By working, they can build and nurture strong networks with other employees. Therefore, internal networking plays a pivotal role in employee productivity, particularly in this pandemic. This situation promotes connectedness by sharing values, collaborating, and supporting among employees, and they become closer in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The outcome of the internal communication during the COVID-19 pandemic is equality since all organization members join a social media group. Employees and leaders listen to and respond to each other. The leaders then commit to being inclusive, fair, and equitable to all employees at all levels through providing accessible and transparent communication. These treatments can personally touch their heart and directly strengthen their bonding as a family since they feel connected in the face of the pandemic.

> "From employees to HRD or employees to leaders, we have a WhatsApp group where it is indeed a forum for communication for all employees". (Informant 1, human resource, travel industry)

> "For now, the communication is various and more kinship. It does not feel like a co-worker, (but) tends to have fraternity relations. If we used to look like a co-worker because we had to be busy with our own work, now the communication is more like a family." (Informant 6, employee, hotel industry)

On the other hand, managing the employees' fears or concerns about the COVID-19 pandemic is pivotal for organizations. The human resource officers opined that the leaders should continuously and intensively communicate with urgency, transparency, and empathy to reduce these feelings and to ensure the employees' condition and performance through some channels such as traditional and digital channels. These channels effectively disseminate the organizations' information—however, this pandemic forces organizations to turn huge numbers into digital channels.

Traditional media such as a notice board and memo are still being used to communicate the organization's information in the face of the COVID-19. These channels have become a complement and have been functioned to provide updated information for employees at the office. Meanwhile, digital media plays a crucial role in intensively disseminating information about the current pandemic, health protocols, and organization's plan in the face of the COVID-19. By using digital media, employees can participate by responding or giving feedback to the messages.

WhatsApp, email, Telegram, Instagram, Facebook, Zoom, and Google Meet have become digital platforms primarily used by organizations. These digital platforms, particularly WhatsApp and Telegram, help the employees stay connected due to the COVID-19 crisis. These digital media provide easy ways to communicate and coordinate with other employees in the same department or cross-department. Therefore, the leaders can ensure that all employees receive the messages and directly respond to the messages or participate in the discussion.

For the organizations having thousands of employees separated nationwide, the human resource officers argue that Instagram and Facebook can effectively give the employees the information they need in this uncertain time, particularly for most millennial employees. Instagram and Facebook provide connectedness among the employees in different branches. Surprisingly, Zoom and Google Meet have become new darling platforms the organization has used since the COVID-19 pandemic. These platforms allow the employees to maintain some business semblance as usual since these platforms provide a virtual meeting feature. Therefore, it is pivotal for leaders to support teams through having online meetings.

In communicating with the employees, the human resource officers shared that the leaders should build empathy by being sensitive to what they feel due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The employees are being cared for and given full attention to feeling comfortable and safe to work in this uncertain time. Employee safety becomes a priority since they are keys to running the business. Therefore, the organizations always consider their employees' health and welfare by providing health protection equipment, aid, and employees' rights.

While this may be true that understanding what the employees face during the COVID-19 crisis is crucial, a personal approach can help reduce anxiety and build employee trust. The financial impact of this pandemic becomes a significant concern of the employees. The organizations sensitively comprehend to overcome this problem by giving loans and relief. The loans and relief can help employees' and their families' life to fulfill their daily needs during this difficult time. Moreover, the leaders directly involve and personally greet and talk to the employees to ensure their safety.

> "It's common that our leaders and HRD (Human Resource Department) are ready to help if our employees, for example, have economic problems, such as debt. We provide convenience and help them based on the company policy" (Informant 1, human resource officer, travel industry)

On the other hand, in uncertain times, the human resource officers and employees shared that the employees need current information on the COVID-19. They have to have a basic understanding of the COVID-19, how the virus will spread, how to prevent or minimize the transmission, and the number of infected persons and red zone areas. Information about the impact of the COVID-19 on the organization has also become a concern for the employees. This critical information can decrease their anxiety and uncertainty, influencing their performance. Therefore, the organizations transparently communicate their financial condition to the employees.

Engaging with Employees

The COVID-19 pandemic is being severely felt by most organizations, particularly the travel, hotel, retail, and food and beverage industries, as a massive business disaster

threatening the organization's existence since the sales and revenue significantly declined. However, the organization and its employees gradually accepted this situation, and they became grateful since their businesses could keep operating. Employees felt that the organization became an essential aspect of their life during the COVID-19 pandemic. They show their gratitude and appreciation for the organization since they still have opportunities to work while other employees in other organizations were laid off because of the pandemic and other external factors. On the other hand, gratitude becomes a powerful way for resilience in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, which can significantly boost the spirit and performance of the employees and motivate them to be more involved and prouder of being a part of the organization.

> "[..]. Because the situation is like this, we have to accept and be grateful because there are still many hotels that have been closed. [..]. About the complaint, there is none, Sir" (Informant 6, employee, hotel industry)

Furthermore, employees become essential since they have a future economic value. They dedicate their effort to running the business of the organization. In this challenging situation, the human resource officers admitted that the employees' support becomes pivotal to keep the organization surviving. They support each other in the same department and across departments by working as a team. They are also proactive and willing to back up each other and not selfish. This condition becomes a resilient way to struggle in this situation. Hence, this pandemic positively impacts the employees to be united, improve the work environment, and sense an entitlement.

It is also interesting to note that the employees worked harder by being innovative, proactive, creative, and supportive, although some employees work remotely. The human resource officers shared that the employees' initiatives to complete their work and maintain their performance are crucial to sustaining the business. This situation encourages the organization to fully believe that its employees performed well due to the COVID-19 pandemic while maintaining employee motivation and engagement. Moreover, the organization requiring the employees to work at the office provides appropriate Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to protect them, such as masks, gloves, and face shields and checking their temperature before entering the office.

Both human resource officers and employees shared that employee engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic increases the employees' sense of belonging to the organizations. They sacrifice themselves to support the organizations' existence and actively contribute to continuing business operations. Therefore, motivating the employees amidst the COVID-19 crisis is crucial to increase work performance since emotional and economic pressure can reduce the employees' spirit.

In building employee engagement amidst the COVID-19 crisis, employee feedback is pivotal. Every employee reflects on the evaluation from his/her colleagues. This evaluation aims to improve the performance of the employees. Therefore, having some

activities that can engage the employees in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic drops in priority, such as praying together and doing social service. Also, engaging the employees strengthens an employee commitment shown from their job satisfaction. This engagement encourages employees' pride and responsibility to support each other. They also feel enthusiastic and motivated by expressing their gratitude since their work has added value. Moreover, being close among the employees during the pandemic enhances their commitment to face this situation.

> "We continue to conduct Al-Qur'an recitations or prayers together so that this problem ends quickly. (We) continue to carry out social service activities in the form of basic necessities to our (external) environment such as poor people, pedicab drivers, online motorcycle drivers who do not have orders. We did that. In addition to sharing with others, we want to foster gratitude to our employees that there are people who have difficulty buying food during this pandemic, thank God we can provide sustenance". (Informant 1, human resource officer, travel industry)

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the organization provides the employees' autonomy to develop their skills and knowledge. This empowerment brings advantages for employee development in the organization. Therefore, support from the organization is crucial to strengthen employee commitment.

> "By 'learning forever,' […], that's something I like, we are always encouraged to solve-learning, so there is a lot of material that we have to make a pass. There is also classroom training there, etc. Thus, the hope is in the future; for instance, as an account manager, it doesn't stop until that position. Sometimes we take a long time; it's been ten years, in the account manager and keeps in that position. Do not stop there, must keep learning because the product is growing. Then, the company is dynamic too". (Informant 14, employee, travel industry)

Discussion

As the unpredictable crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic has upended the organization's business, mainly travel, hotel, food and beverage, and retail industries. Both leaders and employees are worried about the existence of the business of the organization. Therefore, the leaders and employees work together to survive to maintain the organization's sustainability. This pandemic has also strengthened the function of transformational leadership to create organizational performance beyond expectation.

This pandemic also enforces the employees to have multitasking skills to do multitasking jobs. The employees should handle varied responsibilities simultaneously to support the sustainability of the organization during the COVID-19 pandemic. This situation taught the organizations to have employees who have strong multitasking skills

to anticipate rapid environmental changes that might occur in the future. However, Chérif et al. (2018) and Otto et al. (2012) reminded us of the consequences of employee errors caused by multitasking since employees have a high workload and increased stress.

Human Resources Managers, playing the primary role and function of leaders in the Human Resource Department, should develop strategies to integrate into employee development programs to ensure that they have cognitive knowledge and capacities and develop them to solve the organizational problems. It is interesting to note that these strategies describe the idealized influence of transformational leadership since the leaders build employees' confidence and trust through development programs. It is also highlighted that during the COVID-19 pandemic, transformational leaders are crucial in making new policies and procedures to keep the organization surviving.

The inspirational motivation of transformational leaders can be found when they emphatically motivate the employees by encouraging them to be grateful, telling the organization's actual condition, creating a sense of belonging, building teamwork, ensuring that their job is meaningful, listening to their voices, and seeing this pandemic as an opportunity. However, they cannot require a high-performance standard since the organization is not stable due to the pandemic. Moreover, it should be recalled that effective leaders in this uncertain time should be transparent, open, empathetic, and convincing for a better condition in the future.

Through intellectual stimulation of transformational leadership, the leaders play important roles in supporting the organization to maintain the business in an uncertain and challenging time. On the other hand, this pandemic also enforces the employees to have multitasking skills to do multitasking jobs. This situation taught the organizations to have employees who have strong multitasking skills to anticipate rapid environmental changes that might occur in the future. The employees should handle varied responsibilities simultaneously to support the sustainability of the organization during the COVID-19 pandemic by their innovative and creative ideas. Positive leadership encourages the employees' creativity, which initiates innovation (Müceldili et al., 2013). Notably, innovation becomes essential to keep the business surviving in this pandemic.

The individualized consideration of transformational leadership can be reflected when the leaders create trust by involving the employees in the management process, keeping innovative, internalizing positive values, and motivating them. Moreover, the leaders' behaviors help calm, support, and energize employees to feel vested in a joint mission and purpose and embrace new ways of working.

This study's uniqueness contributes to the specific context--the leadership during the global COVID-19 pandemic where the leaders practice transformational leadership to maintain the organization's sustainability. The combination of those four dimensions applied by leaders encourages employees to fully accept leaders' decisions–suspending raises and bonuses, cutting salaries, and reducing benefits even though the decisions impact their livelihood and the entire workforce in a nutshell, including their ability to earn money to pay for essentials like food and housing, among other expenses. Their willingness shows the organizational performance beyond expectation.

In communicating new policies and procedures to guarantee employees' safety and health, transformational leaders use social media platforms since they must quickly ensure that the decisions can be understood and delivered from top to bottom. This study also highlights that, apart from the traditional tools used in internal communication, there is currently much attention for using digital media platforms, such as social media, to communicate with employees. These platforms provide solutions to develop and maintain internal communication since these platforms provide two-way communication systems. Social media platforms also function to stay connected among the employees, combat feelings of isolation, and encourage a sense of inclusion.

On the other hand, this study's responses confirm that the internal communication flows tend to be equal through social media platforms since the communication hierarchy becomes dynamic due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The employees can directly communicate, respond, and give feedback to the leaders' messages through these platforms. These platforms also allow the employee to participate in decision-making since these platforms facilitate knowledge transfers (Cao et al., 2016). Therefore, it is interesting to note that leaders can develop employees' ideas by creating a comfortable work environment. The work environment should be able to encourage employees to speak up.

Effective internal communication becomes even more critical during times of crisis and uncertainty. The organization frequently and intensively communicates to the employees, and the communication flow is flexible. The content or messages are more on employee well-being since the employees are grateful in the face of this pandemic by maintaining positive emotions. Gratitude, on the other hand, becomes the first step to reducing and coping with the stress caused by this pandemic (Ruini & Vescovelli, 2012). Therefore, it is worth noting that leaders should maintain the employees' positive emotions with passionate communication and sensitively understand their problems and needs.

Feedbacks from the employees improve the quality of internal communication and engagement in this situation. It is worth noting that in giving and receiving feedback, both employees and leaders listen to each other to understand the organization and employees' problems, mainly listening to the employees' aspirations, hopes, and fears in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, listening is pivotal, and it can drive organizational climate change, ultimately bringing the organization's advantages (Schramm, 2017).

This study's responses highlight that shifting to remote work, working from the office with strict health protocols, flexible working hours and/or days, and clear and transparent communication from the organization's leaders are critical factors in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. This finding emphasizes that in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, employee safety and health are the priority. If employees do not feel safe and healthy, the organization will be unable to move forward. Moreover, it is also noted that most organizations struggle to communicate with their employees effectively. Therefore, focusing on providing clear and transparent communication positively impacts business performance (Ulmer, 2012).

Staying connected in this pandemic builds a sense of organizational belonging, improving employee engagement since the employees feel more enthusiastic about their work. This pandemic also encourages the employees to be proactive and willing to help other employees, either in the same department or cross-department. It is interesting to note that the proactive employees help the organization to struggle in this complicated situation. The employees' proactive behavior enhances the organization to be more effective in running the business and less stressed since they enjoy their responsibilities (Bolino et al., 2010). As a result, the work environment will be more comfortable for the employees and encourage unity.

Employee initiatives in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic are critical since the leaders cannot regularly and intensively control employee performance in face-to-face situations. Employee initiatives originate great ideas that can maintain and enhance organizational business sustainability amidst this difficult time. From this study's responses, the top leadership plays a pivotal role in fostering employee initiatives by positively involving the employees in the management process and keeping the employee's motivations (Rantakari, 2012).

In this challenging time, the leaders encourage employees to be creative, innovative, and collaborative. These values becoming the most critical values that benefit the organization to develop its business have been internalized in the leadership to combat the COVID-19 pandemic, and these values help the employees generate new ideas of the innovation (Dul & Ceylan, 2011). Moreover, this situation also strengthens the employees' sense of belonging to the organization since they understand and know what their organization stands for.

Nevertheless, the experiences of facing the COVID-19 pandemic become the foundation of how transformational leaders and employees describe employee engagement. They conceptualized employee engagement as a challenging effort to mentally and physically connect between the organization and its employees aiming to keep the organization sustainable by compromising their compensation, supporting one another as teamwork, and enhancing their skills to adapt to a changing environment. Engaged employees in this challenging time are motivated to strive for the existence and sustainability of the organization. Although some organizations reduce the salary since they also reduce the working hours, employees keep committed to struggling together in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic since they evaluated that the organizational climate provides a positive environment and transparency. Therefore, the employees care and support each other among their peers.

Furthermore, how transformational leaders and employees conceptualize engagement becomes an essential component. Employee engagement has been functioned to strengthen the functional paradigm. The organization has to have leaders and employees who have strong multitasking skills to anticipate the rapid environmental changes in the future. On the other hand, a significant concern on employee engagement due to the COVID-19 pandemic is bonding between the organization and its employees and internalizing positive values based on a spiritual macro value. It is suggested that the organizations in Indonesia in which religion becomes a philosophical

foundation, using spiritual values as a macro value of Indonesians, can strengthen the relations between the organization and its employees to face the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, employee engagement in this challenging time encourages the creativity of leaders and employees since this creativity initiates innovation.

Conclusion

Four dimensions of transformational leadership can be utilized to keep the organization sustainable due to the COVID-19 pandemic by making fair and wise decisions, emphatically motivating employees, encouraging intellectual stimulation such as innovation and creativity, and ensuring the employees' involvement in business survival. Transformational leaders use internal communication to strengthen employee engagement. First, they transparently communicate the organization's condition and decisions made by them. Next, to support the implementation of the decisions, the leaders need to give inspirational motivation to employees so that they voluntarily commit to the organization. In addition, the leaders enhance employees' capabilities to develop their innovation and creativity. Lastly, ensuring employees' involvement becomes an important aspect to show their essential role in supporting the organization due to the difficult time.

This study's findings provide a critical foundation for maximizing the role of transformational leadership. Supported by internal communication—shifting to new media channels, transformational leadership can strengthen employee engagement. Employee engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic can be improved by utilizing spiritual values. As Reave (2005) argued, spiritual values can effectively enhance leadership success (utilizing leaders). These values can also generate genuine attitudes, behavior, and performance of the employees supporting the organization in the pandemic face.

The result of this study also provides vital information to organizations--retail, hotel, food and beverage, and travel sectors to adapt to this pandemic and understand how to keep their business sustainable by applying transformational leadership. On the other hand, our study has a limitation. Our results are based on the one-time interviews and employees' reports from human resources officers' and employees' reports. We cannot validate whether the reports reflect what they do and face during the COVID-19 pandemic but have no reason to doubt their claims. We do not directly observe how the human resources officers communicate with the employees since the pandemic complicates direct observation. Future studies should use multiple techniques to acquire a more nuanced understanding of transformational leadership, internal communication, and employee engagement by exploring and comparing the interest of human resource officers and employees.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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