The effect of COVID-19 on managerial leadership style within Australian public sector organizations

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Abstract

This study investigates the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on leadership styles within Australian public sector organizations during the COVID-19 pandemic. A qualitative methodology was employed for this research consisting of semi-structured interviews with 50 managers. The study results suggest the pandemic affected managers' leadership style, managers' and employees' emotions, stress and anxiety, and organizational performance and productivity. Changes in leadership style to incorporate being supportive, informative, and motivational to match the change in situation were found to be effective. This addresses a gap in the literature by identifying these three leadership styles as being important for employee support during the pandemic.

Keywords

leadership style, supportive, informative and motivational leader, emotion, stress and anxiety, organizational performance and productivity, COVID-19 pandemic, public sector organizations

Introduction

The uncertainty introduced by COVID-19 has imposed changes in all aspects of life. The freedom of individuals to go about their daily lives was suddenly and dramatically restricted to prevent community transmission. The necessary speed with which this occurred did not provide much opportunity for organizations to introduce working procedures that still allowed communication with work colleagues, as well as catering for employees to adapt their homes to accommodate workspaces in which to undertake their work activities. Employees needed to rapidly adjust to unfamiliar work circumstances to enable them to maintain their productivity levels (Waizenegger et al., 2020).

Research on worldwide disasters, such as the current pandemic, investigated the risks, critical incidents, and risk settings faced by leaders and those leaders' responses from a variety of angles (McNulty et al., 2019). Factors investigated have included the effects of those situations on employee performance and turnover (Bader et al., 2019), and the effects of factors such as working environments, and workloads and employees' physical and mental health (Bader et al., 2019; Faeth and Kittler, 2017). It should be noted that little is known about research into the challenges faced by leaders and the resulting organizational outcomes from the less common types of threats, such as the current pandemic, in comparison to threats emanating from humans, such as crime and civil disturbances, which have received far more attention (Fee, 2017).

The current situation has proved to be a challenge for leaders throughout the world. While some have successfully managed, others have not been so successful. Leaders have had to adapt their roles to include being motivators in order to maintain their employees' motivation and performance. Employees' motivation will increase and their views on work will strengthen when they are supported by their leaders. This will enhance both their work performance and their flexibility within their own job. Additionally, leaders should provide regular briefings to reinforce motivation (Novitasari et al., 2020). This will help to maintain or even enhance employees' agility, particularly during the current pandemic (Novitasari et al., 2020). Leadership has an important part to play in developing the performance of both the organization and its employees. The World Health Organization (WHO) officially announced a pandemic on 11 March 2020 (Isautier et al., 2020). Australian organizations were prompt in introducing systems to cater for the change in circumstances, including adapted leadership styles, to manage their workforces. The intent of these new styles was to help employees to maintain their health and their productivity by lowering their chances of exposure to the virus. This could then be used as a blueprint for future similar occurrences.

This pandemic has required significant and instant changes to all life aspects. Leadership in organizations has a

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vital role to keep the organization functioning during a crisis. In the response of organizations to crises, the fundamental role of leadership is to ensure organizational sustainability (Kezar et al., 2018). There is a necessity to focus the leaders' efforts to preserving this fundamental role of leadership to maintain organizational sustainability over other organizational goals. Effort before the crisis in building a culture of trust, collaboration, and participative management significantly influences the ability of the organization to survive times of crisis (Kezar et al., 2018). Notwithstanding pre-crisis management efforts, changes in leadership style are expected to happen during a crisis. For example, Jones and Olken (2005) found that leadership transitions are associated with shifts in economic growth rates after the sudden deaths of national leaders. Also, Stoker et al. (2019) studied how the Global Financial Crisis in 2008 changed leadership behavior and caused an increase in the directive leadership style.

There has been an impact from the pandemic at a macro-level on leadership behavior. The effects are not only limited to changes in leadership style, but also to shifting of organizational priorities seen within the wider organizational context (Oc, 2018). Due to the great lockdown organizations all over the world had to use a partial or complete virtual team structure. Virtual work is characterized by work arrangements in which employees are separated in various ways (e.g., geographically) and interact using technology (Huang et al., 2010). During the pandemic, an organizational leader's role is altered and expanded to ensure the effectiveness of virtual work in organizations that depends on the structure of the virtual teams and their effective communication of knowledge and information efficiently, along with the supporting technology (Townsend et al., 1998).

Many of the standard models used in leadership have undergone transformation in order to adapt to changing circumstances. Organizations' leadership models need to adapt to reflect changing circumstances whatever their field or activity sector (McVea and Freeman, 2005). Leaders' effectiveness rests on how effectively they can adapt to their organization's situation. With COVID-19 sweeping the world leaders have needed to adapt their leadership styles to maximize their effectiveness under the circumstances.

Rosinha et al. (2017) noted that managers need to lead their employees more effectively in the workplace. The COVID-19 pandemic has emphasized this. To this time, there has been relatively little investigation into the role of leaders in reducing employee stress and anxiety, which increases during large scale stressful situations, as exemplified by the COVID-19 pandemic (Oruh et al., 2021).

The aim of this study is to address the research question, "What are the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on leadership styles within Australian public sector organizations?" It also intends to identify if the pandemic affected the leaders' emotions as well as their employees' emotions. It identifies approaches used by leaders that have assisted them to handle the situation with reference to their personal experiences and explores the effects, if any, of the pandemic on employee performance.

Prior studies have paid relatively little attention to leadership in the Australian public sector, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. To the present time, no literature on the adaptive styles of leadership has been incorporated into any descriptions of leadership methods used during the pandemic. It is for this reason that investigation of this topic is considered worthwhile. This study supplements research into the effect of the pandemic on both individuals' performance and emotions as they work to achieve results in the difficult circumstances experienced.

COVID-19: An Australian perspective

The Australian political system is a liberal democracy with a Westminster-style government. To date, Australia has been one of the most successful nations in the developed world in limiting the spread of COVID-19 (Ritchie and Roser, 2020). This success has been due to a combination of factors, including its national stability, relative affluence, and geographic isolation (O'Sullivan et al., 2020).

Individuals' movements were restricted as the lockdowns took effect and the lives of the vast majority of the population changed dramatically, a situation that is still the case as new flare-ups of infection occur. Peoples' reactions varied, with most experiencing feelings of uncertainty and anxiety, while others responded with apathy and denial. Governments ease restrictions slowly, only to reintroduce them in response to new infections (Shakespeare-Finch et al., 2020).

Effects on mental health

While mental health for the large majority of Australians is not likely to suffer enormously as a result of the pandemic, there are significant numbers where this may be the case, particularly where they have been directly affected by the disease. That said, the continual disruption caused by rolling lockdowns instated by governments at the national and state levels may well result in challenges in adjusting to the "new normal," resulting in the possibility of negative reactions and increased disorder (Steel, 2020). The 11th revision of the International Classification of Diseases (WHO, 2018) describes adjustment disorder as having heightened levels of worry, failure to adapt, and unhealthy levels of reflection, particularly of the negative kind, resulting in impairment in the ability to deal effectively with many life issues. As the COVID-19 pandemic continues, the world needs to develop strategies to alleviate the stress associated with the pandemic as it continues to cause worldwide havoc (Shakespeare-Finch et al., 2020).

Reports of anxiety among the Australian population doubled, according to figures collected by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), with reports of nervousness and restlessness also featuring prominently in comparison to pre-COVID levels (Shakespeare-Finch et al., 2020). High levels of loneliness were also reported (22%), while reports of severe depression doubled to 10% (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2020). While much evidence relating to increased concern and distress relating to the pandemic has been collected, it is important to recognize that looking to models of resilience, recovery from grief and trauma, hope, and self-compassion as the way out of the current stressful situation will assist people in successfully getting through this currently testing time (Shakespeare-Finch et al., 2020). Actions that may encourage growth include being more willing to express emotions, becoming involved in healthy relationships,

pursuing new interests, investigating new opportunities, and acknowledging strengths.

The United Nations urged the international community on 14 May 2020 to make an effort to protect those experiencing mental health pressures resulting from COVID-19 and highlighting the relationship between anxiety, depression, and despair (O'Sullivan et al., 2020). This was based on a survey revealing that large proportions of the populations in a number of countries reported elevated levels of stress resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic (United Nations, 2020). Australia has not been immune from this and, as a result, has introduced an efficient system to deliver services supporting mental health through medical practitioners (O'Sullivan et al., 2020).

The effect of the pandemic on leadership

Despite the large body of literature, leadership has continued to attract academic interest. Organizational leadership relates to how an organization's managers motivate their workforce to achieve the organizational goals (Kotter, 2001). The role of leadership is crucial for organizations. The role of leadership role is to institute direction for a working group and employees to gain commitment from this group of members to a defined direction and to then motivate members to achieve the organizational goals (Conger and Kanungo, 1992). Organizational successes are attributed to effective leadership and have been viewed as a competitive edge (Van Knippenberg and Hogg, 2003); however, there is no agreement about how leadership skills develop (Day, 2000; Yukl et al., 2002).

At first, affective leadership was attributed to a leader's personality traits (Judge and Bono, 2000), and personality has been viewed in terms of stable tendencies and cannot be changed, whereas the behavioral view of leadership describes it as a behavioral style, suggesting that leadership can be learned and individuals can be trained to be effective leaders, considering the fact that leadership skills involve a mix of behavioral, cognitive, and communication skills that require different learning experiences (Day et al., 2004). Furthermore, the situational leadership view asserts that effective leadership is the best combination between a particular leadership style and a situation. Accordingly, a leadership style will be effective in one situation, but a different leadership style will be effective in another situation.

There has been increasing attention to the transformational and charismatic forms of leadership in the last couple of decades (Bass, 1985, 1996, 1999; Burns, 1978; Conger, 1999; House, 1977). Transformational leaders motivate their followers to increase their involvement and their performance, offer feedback, be mindful of their colleagues' needs, and assist their colleagues to be more creative and innovative (Bass, 1985; Yukl, 1999). Additionally, they inspire their followers to achievements exceeding their expectations by transforming their beliefs, values, and attitudes (Ariyabuddhiphongs and Kahn, 2017; Rafferty and Griffin, 2004), resulting in increased performance. According to Fiedler's Leadership Contingency Model (Fiedler, 1989, 2005), leadership effectiveness will depend on the situation and its contingencies. Fiedler described situations as being based on three dimensions: how is the interpersonal relationship between the leader and the follower, how structured is the task, and what level of authority the leader has over the follower? Less attention has been directed towards contingency leadership specifically in relation to the current pandemic. According to Fiedler's model, there are only two types of leader: task-oriented leaders and relationship-oriented leaders, each of which will be more effective in specific situations. Cognitive Resource Theory (CRT) (Murphy et al., 1992) expanded Fiedler's model by adding the traits of the leader to the original contingency model (Fiedler, 1989) with a focus on the leadership response to stress. CRT defines conditions under which leaders and followers are more likely to use their intellect, skills, and knowledge to mitigate the consequences of stress on their behavior. The model asserts that the more intelligent and more experienced the leaders, the better the performance.

When it comes to leadership decision-making, there are different styles, each of which has its strength and weaknesses. For example, there are participative, democratic, consensus, and consultative styles, ranging through to an autocratic style. Participative leadership seeks widespread staff input in order to share decision-making but, the leader still has the final say. Leaders employing a participative style foster increased employee involvement which can lead to better performance and enhanced efficiency. This can result in improved results for the organization (AlMazrouei, 2012). Consultative leadership occurs when leaders discuss events with their staff before arriving at a decision (Oshagbemi, 2008). This style is participative, resulting in greater employee feelings of ownership of decisions reached while democratic leadership is a similar style, in that the leader devolves the responsibility for making decisions to lower levels within the organization. This has the effect of allowing employees to take greater responsibility for decisions and the resulting outcomes, benefiting morale (Goleman, 2000). Consensus leadership (West et al., 2001) is also similar, in that the leader promotes discussion of the issues with a view to achieving consensus amongst stakeholders; however, the leader still makes the final decision, while an autocratic leadership style (Bass, 1990) is where the decision is made solely by the leader without employee agreement or even involvement in the process except, perhaps, to provide data if and when required. This style is often necessary when a quick and firm decision is required, followed by prompt implementation, particularly during crises.

For leaders to effectively manage their employees, they need to be adaptable and responsive to the vicissitudes of their organizational climate (Clark and Harrison 2018). It is the characteristics of a given situation that determines the direction that an organization's leadership takes (Clark and Harrison, 2018). Effective leadership is critical in managing employees' anxiety, especially in extreme circumstances (Gilbert, 2009), like the COVID-19 pandemic (Rothan and Byrareddy, 2020).

A non-supportive style of leadership is of little effect in extreme circumstances (Hewison et al., 2018), like the COVID-19 pandemic, which has increased employees' stress levels due to concerns over aspects such as health, well-being, and job security. Supportive and compassionate leaders

display behaviors including empathy, understanding, and support for their employees (Wasylyshyn and Masterpasqua, 2018), which is essential, especially in crisis situations (Martin and Heineberg, 2017). Supportive leadership creates an organizational culture where employees feel sustained (Gilbert, 2009). It creates an organizational environment that encourages employees to express their concerns and then provides them with assistance in dealing with those concerns (Taylor et al., 2011), helping to manage their anxiety (Kelly et al., 2017). This is of particular relevance in the current COVID-19 pandemic, which is significantly disrupting the lives of populations worldwide, both domestically and in the workplace (Effiong et al., 2020). While supportive leadership has been extensively studied, it has not been researched in the particular context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

COVID-19 also introduced another challenge to leadership as many organizations were forced to have their employees work remotely as well as adapting a virtual team structure. A review of the literature showed that there are few studies that have investigated leadership in virtual teams during a crisis, particularly in virtual work settings. There are studies of leadership in virtual work settings, for example, Hoch and Dulebohn (2017), but not in crisis situations, and leadership in virtual teams has been insufficiently investigated (Liao, 2017).

Crises are situations that occur unexpectedly and are not a normal part of a leader's scope. These situations can be uncertain and complicated, and are often dynamic in nature. Their characteristics include fragmented, and often conflicting, information (Sadiq et al., 2020). Leaders need to be able to quickly gain an understanding of the situation and be able to anticipate and gauge risk, gather relevant information quickly, and be able to formulate an effective response (Boin et al., 2010; Comfort et al., 2020). They need the capacity to take charge in these types of circumstances otherwise the situation can escalate, rendering it insurmountable (Sadiq et al., 2020). Leadership in a crisis also involves contingency planning to enact an effective response, mitigate the amount of possible damage caused, and lay the groundwork for recovery (Kapucu and Van Wart, 2008).

The devolution of responsibility for the management of certain facets of responsibility in more stable times does much to engender a culture of trust and cooperation. This culture will help to better formulate a more effective response to any crisis situations that occur (Kezar et al., 2018), as it allows better quality decision-making to occur, derived through a combination of various viewpoints (Kezar and Holcombe, 2017). Once this culture is established the leader can plan and coordinate their response to any crisis, secure in the knowledge that their team members will provide trustworthy advice and effective cooperation (Fernandez and Shaw, 2020).

The effect of the pandemic on employee performance

Task performance has been the primary focus of the task performance literature and has been seen as the core aspect of work behaviors. Literature has regarded task performance as

being the main element, if not the sole aspect, of task performance. Task performance is the expected employee's role by contract and that includes a set of activities the employees need to undertake to fulfill tasks. Katz and Kahn (1966) referred to task performance as role performance and defined it as the level of achieving the quantitative and qualitative criteria of performance. Campbell (1990) described it as actions and behaviors engaged in for the purpose of fulfilling core tasks, while Organ (1988) defined task performance as the formal job responsibilities allocated by organizational administration and are measured during performance appraisal periods. The notion of job performance has undergone a renaissance lately to include the related concepts of core task performance, negative performance, and organizational citizenship. Core task performance relates to a position's basic job requirements (Hunt, 1996; Organ, 1988). Negative performance describes intentionally negative employee behaviors aimed at damaging an organization's interests (Bennett and Robinson, 2000). Organizational citizenship relates to employee behaviors undertaken over and above those tasks required to satisfy basic job requirements (Hunt, 1996; Organ, 1988). It was found that each of these aspects affected organizational performance, but core task performance was found to be the most significant (Rotundo and Sackett, 2002).

Performance is a process directed towards ensuring that organizational processes are geared towards maximizing employee productivity and, in so doing, team and organization productivity as well. Other schools of thought focus more on employee achievements (Luthans, 2005). The most interesting aspect of the Novitasari et al. (2020) study involves the significant effect the pandemic has had on employees' performance. It is expected that this insight will assist leaders and managers to minimize the challenges and difficulties they experience in limiting the negative influences on employee performance resulting from the pandemic (Narayanamurthy and Tortorella, 2021). There has been comparatively little attention given to Australian public sector managers, particularly in relation to employee performance in the context of the current pandemic; thus, it is considered this topic is worth pursuing. This paper explores the effect of COVID-19 pandemic on leadership practice inside the organization by exploring changes in both leadership style and employees' performance.

Unexpected but dramatic change caused by events such as the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly affected employees and organizations alike (Williams et al., 2017). Issues have included remote working, closures of national borders, and illnesses of both a mental and physical nature. These have caused a reduction in employees' inclination to work. Continued remote working has increased the chances of employees suffering reactions such as anxiety, frustration, and feelings of isolation which, in combination, can reduce both the quality and quantity of their output (Narayanamurthy and Tortorella, 2021).

Methodology

Qualitative methodology was used for this research, employing purposive sampling. The decision was made to utilize qualitative research as this would offer a better

opportunity to examine the subject under investigation and gain a better understanding of participants' perceptions and emotions relating to the topic (Palys, 2008). The research highlighted the perceptions and emotions experienced by the participants in relation to the topic and, in so doing, the researcher was able to gain a better appreciation of the effects of the pandemic on public sector managers.

Sample

Respondents were selected through contacts in public sector organizations and by snowball sampling. Interviews were held to discern the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on 50 managers who had worked for between ten and thirty years in the Australian public sector. Of these, 85% were Australian nationals, 5% were Indian and those with a Pakistani background comprised the remaining 10%. Most of the interviewees were aged between 25 and 55 years, with a tenure in their current organization of between 6 months and 20 years. All the participants were employed by their organizations during the pandemic.

Despite the relatively low number of participants, the researcher found that data saturation was reached. Due to this, the sample size of fifty was sufficient to ensure that most of the views expressed were likely to be representative of the views of the study population. All the managers participated in semi-structured interviews. All the participants had a minimum of six months' experience in managerial positions in their current organization prior to the onset of the pandemic.

Interviewees were selected from public sector organizations at both the state and federal level. Their selection was based on their occupation of a leadership role and their length of tenure within their organization. Their positions ranged from supervisors to middle managers. Selected interviewees represented a wide range of job types, such as accounting, human resource management, engineering, and IT (see Table 1).

Procedure

A pilot study was conducted to ensure that the data collection method to be used in the study would ensure validity and that questions appropriate to the topic under investigation were developed. The research instrument was given to five respondents at different managerial levels in different public sector organizations to ensure that the questions were

understandable. The results of the pilot study revealed that the research questions were appropriate. The identical open-ended questions used in the semi-structured interviews in both the pilot study and the main study allowed the investigator to gain in-depth data relating to participants' points of view.

Semi-structured interviews, lasting from 60 to 90 min using Zoom, were held with managers to find out if, and how, COVID-19 had affected their organizations. The interviews comprised ten open-ended questions to encourage interviewees to provide as much information as possible. Examples of the research questions are, "Has the pandemic changed your leadership style? If so, how and if not, why not?", "Has the pandemic effected your emotions? If so, how and if not, why not?", "Has the pandemic effected your employees emotions? If so, how and if not, why not?", and "Has the pandemic affected the organization's productivity and performance during this the pandemic? If so, how and if not, why not?" Based on the author's experience working in public sector organizations, the questions were formulated in recognition of leadership styles adapting out of necessity during the pandemic, elevated levels of anxiety and stress for both managers and employees during the pandemic, and possible effects on organizational performance and productivity resulting from this. Participants were advised that their interviews would be recorded to assist with later transcription of the content of their interviews. Participants were contacted by phone to confirm their willingness to participate and were subsequently provided with a consent form to sign. Responses from each of the participants were transcribed exactly as recorded. The responses collected were examined using data analysis in order to identify significant themes.

Data analysis

The method of data analysis involved conducting a review of the literature to first gain an appreciation of the current body of knowledge relating to the COVID-19 pandemic. Next, it involved developing the research question relating to the effect of COVID-19 on managerial leadership style within Australian public sector organizations. Purposive stratified sampling was used to identify participants with the appropriate representative characteristics to provide responses that would best illuminate the topic and therefore extend the literature and theory (AlMazrouei et al., 2016). Following this, the responses were grouped into themes (Ramaswami and Dreher, 2010) that were representative of the intent of the participants' responses. Answers repeated by different participants were only recorded once. Once collected, the responses were aggregated, and then classified under themes (AlMazrouei et al., 2015).

The content of the interviews provided a significant amount of rich data that offered useful insights into the leaders' emotions and thoughts in response to the COVID pandemic. A research assistant described leadership styles and roles in a way that the participants were easily able to understand them. The research assistant then transcribed the participants' responses to the questions and coded the responses into categories in order to identify patterns and themes to assist with interpreting the data. The author of this

Table 1. Characteristics of the survey sample (N = 50).

Gender		Nationality	
Male	28	Australian/NZ	46
Female	22	Pakistan	3
		Indian	1
Education		**Age**	
High school	5	Below 30 years	5
Bachelors	27	30–40 years	19
Masters	17	Over 40 years	26
PhD	1		

study provided support to the research assistant to group the responses into themes, where required. This is because they possessed a more in-depth knowledge of the concepts under investigation.

Following discussion and subsequent agreement between the main author and the research assistant to ensure coding accuracy, the resulting dimensions and themes were decided upon. Below are the significant outcomes derived from this research.

The data resulting from the interviews, including data transcripts and observational notes, provided a large quantity of data that was rich in detail and subjective, given the context from which it was derived. The interviews also assisted in building knowledge of managers' spirits, thoughts, and actions as well as insights into their interpretations of the pandemic and its effects on the public sector organizations in which they worked. The data was catalogued into significant themes and patterns to assist with interpretation and facilitate the ensuing discussion. The effects of the pandemic on supportive, innovative and motivational leaders, emotional stress and anxiety, adaptable organizations, and organizational productivity and performance emerged as significant themes from this study.

Findings

In the pandemic, organizations need to effectively manage their employees if they want to maintain productivity and performance. This study investigates the effect of COVID-19 on managerial leadership styles within public sector organizations. It explores managers' perceptions of the pandemic and its effect on their emotions and the performance of the organization. The research question aimed to investigate managers' points of view regarding the topic under investigation. This study identified four themes as presented in Table 2: (1) Supportive, informative, and motivational leadership; (2) Emotional stress and anxiety; (3) Adaptable organization; and (4) Organizational performance and productivity.

Supportive, informative, and motivational leadership

The study examined the effect of COVID-19 on the leadership style within Australian public sector organizations. The findings suggest that leaders had changed their style due to the pandemic. Most of the respondents said that this is the time for leaders to engage with their people, to motivate them and to trust them, and to learn to relax their grip on control and allow their people at every level to support them to lead for themselves.

Managers indicated that they had to adjust their leadership styles so they could take on more of a supportive role for their employees, owing to the exceptional circumstances the spread of the virus had produced. Many employees were seen to be having difficulties concentrating on their work because of having to work from home and the distractions this brings.

Some of the respondents changed their style during the pandemic, becoming more informative as they needed to keep their employees as informed as possible about the rapidly developing situation and its effect on the

organization's policies and work practices. While many employees were confused by the constant changes in policy and practice as organizations rapidly altered their stances to cope with the frequently developing medical and government requirements relating to the pandemic, some managers were also confused by the rapid changes in instructions coming from higher up in their organizations. Managers' efforts to keep their team members fully informed of each development sometimes resulted in confusion as the messages changed so quickly and therefore appeared contradictory. The challenge, of course, is to maintain the right amount of communication. Too much, and the messages appear confused or contradictory. Too little, and employees feel they are left in the dark and begin filling in the gaps through the office grapevine. When this happens, the resulting "scuttlebutt" is usually incorrect and invariably not complimentary to the organization or its management.

The majority of the respondents indicated that they become more of a motivator during the pandemic. Some indicated that they became a more informative leader, making sure their employees were informed promptly about work-related changes. This finding shows that leaders' management styles changed during the pandemic, becoming more empathetic. This was due to the pandemic affecting leaders and employees alike. Leaders are now more open to allowing employees more agency in how they approach their work and take more interest in their employees' viewpoints. This has been quite some change from how many managers have traditionally operated (see Table 2).

Many of the managers indicated that their role during this situation was to encourage and motivate their employees to be more productive by developing and implementing a plan to make this happen (see Table 2). Interviewees provided 103 statements in response to the question: "What was your role during this situation?" These statements were categorized into three dimensions: (1) motivator, (2) supporter, and (3) informative. Respondents most often described their role during the pandemic:

- Highly motivating their employees by sending daily emails as a reminder that the situation was temporary (33%).
- They often support their employees and provide them with the resources they need to work outside the office (25%).
- Keeping their employees informed about changes in the situation (22%).

Emotional stress and anxiety

Almost all of the managers said that the pandemic affected their emotions. This mainly involved concern and uncertainty about whether their employees would be affected mentally or physically, as well as a measure of stress and anxiety (see Table 2). Because of the highly unusual circumstances brought about by the spread of the virus and the government-imposed restrictions put in place to combat its spread, many managers and employees experienced increased levels of stress. This stress was due to uncertainty about the future, both medically and economically.

Table 2. Sample of statements from respondents relating to four themes.

Theme 1 Supportive, informative, and motivational leader	Theme 2 Emotional stress and anxiety	Theme 3 Adaptable organization	Theme 4 Organizational performance and productivity
This is the time for leaders to engage with their people, to motivate them and to trust them, and to learn to relax their grip on control and allow their people at every level to lead for themselves.	Yes, it has. I was worried about how my team members were coping mentally, and whether it was affecting their stability and loyalty. This is particularly important for those team members who are performing at a higher level or who have the potential to do so.	The current situation has forced organizations and their members to change how they work. Some of the changes will be here to stay. This goes beyond just the current situation of working from home.	I believe the organization's productivity has gone down during the crisis. A lot of the employees felt panicked during this crisis fearing they would be infected by the virus. This caused them to put less effort into their work which affected the organization's performance and productivity.
This is the time for leaders to engage with their people, to motivate them and to trust them, and to learn to relax their grip on control and allow their people at every level to lead for themselves.	Many of my people don't feel safe. They are concerned about their safety, as well as that of their families, their children and their elderly parents, particularly as the virus seems to affect older people more.	Adapting work protocols to cope with rapidly changing circumstances isn't so unusual. Even the types of unexpected events with which we are confronted daily offer opportunities to adapt and become more agile. The thing is that these events don't come with instruction manuals. It's up to employees as much as their managers to find ways to get over the myriad of problems they constantly encounter to find a way to progress.	Working in the usual office environment doesn't offer as many distractions as working from home. At home, there are always so many things to take your concentration away from your work, and that makes it easier to lose the thread of what you are working on.
I motivate my employees during this crisis. I send them emails daily reminding them that this is a temporary situation and we need to work together to overcome this situation. I encourage my people to keep trying for excellence because it is still possible to achieve this, despite the situation. I provide them with the advice they need to achieve this.	Most of our people appear to have greater emotional strength and resilience, meaning they don't seem to be affected by the situation. They just concentrate on their work.	There was no need to change the direction of the organization. We continued to use the same methods of accomplishing work.	There are lots of things that can distract us if we are working from home, so you need to remain strong and focused on work, ignoring those little distractions that can take you away from the task at hand. Because we are not socializing as much, we are not as happy and this is leading to lower morale and productivity.
During this crisis, I offered support to my staff by providing them with the necessary resources to work from home or even from the office. I support my team by personally calling each of them every day to find out how they are and to discuss any work issues or problems they are experiencing. That way they don't feel like they have been left alone and without support.	The pandemic has an impact on everybody's emotions and feelings. We were not stable in our emotions. There was lots of fear and uncertainty. We were very worried and concerned about it.	Organizations that are already equipped to work remotely are at an advantage because they already have the capability to be agile. They can be agile because they have already planned by putting in place the infrastructure for their staff to work remotely. This has enabled them to move swiftly to a work from home regime.	During this crisis, I think the productivity of the company has increased as we looked for new ways to do our work and achieve our plans.

Table 2. (continued)

Theme 1 Supportive, informative, and motivational leader	Theme 2 Emotional stress and anxiety	Theme 3 Adaptable organization	Theme 4 Organizational performance and productivity
People need to be kept informed straight away about changes as they happen. It's important to keep some clarity about how things are in the current situation. People who are informed can, so much more, become team players. It's important that this happens to allow your organization's business to keep going. Maintaining contact with your people is also so important.	The pandemic affects our emotions. It creates more stress, as on top of our managerial responsibilities we have to manage employees remotely.	The organization had to change its direction by making intensive use of technology, such as teams and video conferencing to enable our people to work from home to get the job done.	It is possible to be more productive working from home. There doesn't need to be a pandemic to figure that out.
It helps to maintain some sort of stability, no matter what is happening around us. People need that. You need to maintain contact through whatever means you can, the phone, the internet, online meetings, whatever. Just keep in touch.	It was noticeable that employees were anxious and stressed about the pandemic as they were worried about their health and that of their family and friends.	Employees are more updated about the changes the organization makes on a daily basis. Frequent policy changes and practices as organizations hastily changed to cope with the rapidly developing requirements imposed by governments.	The coronavirus working world is allowing us to perceive how work will look like in the future. We've been able to work remotely for a long while already but only now are we seeing it happen on such a large scale. The reason for this needing to happen is awful, but sometimes it takes a crisis for people to make the effort to innovate in the way they work.

One manager responded:

"Yes. It has. I was worried about how my team members were coping mentally, and whether it was affecting their stability and loyalty. This is particularly important for those team members who are performing at a higher level or who have the potential to do so."

A manager provided the following response:

"Many of my people don't feel safe. They are concerned about their safety, as well as that of their families, their children and their elderly parents, particularly as the virus seems to affect older people more."

The COVID-19 pandemic presented challenges to leaders at all organizational levels, requiring them to adjust their responses in accordance with the changing circumstances in order to continue delivering their organizations' objectives. The pandemic challenged leaders at all levels within organizations, requiring that they adapt to the dynamic situation so their staff could continue to deliver their organizations' objectives. Tuzovic and Kabadayi (2018) noted that a common theme provided by leaders was that clear and unambiguous communication was a critical aspect of managing their staff and staff emotions.

Almost all of the managers said that the pandemic had affected their employees' emotions, while a very few indicated that it had not affected their emotions because their employees all had different levels of emotional strength. It is acknowledged that interviewees offered relatively fewer responses to this question.

Managers described a variety of different approaches they used to support their employees' emotional well-being.

These included communicating with them on a daily basis, either via email, telephone, or other online communication platforms, to remind them that the situation would be relatively temporary. Other options used were the introduction of online social events such as trivia quizzes and themed fancy dress competitions in an effort to boost morale.

Adaptable organization

Most of the respondents indicated that the pandemic had an effect on the organization's direction (see Table 2), while some indicated the pandemic had no impact on their organization's direction. The finding suggests that the large majority of managers have been forced to change how they work as had their organization and become a more adaptable organization. This mainly involved introducing new strategies and regulations to maintain efficiency.

They introduced remote working, which allowed employees to work from home. Some of them indicated that they become agile because they had already planned by putting in place the infrastructure for their staff to work remotely. This has enabled them to move swiftly to a work from home regime. A lot of the interviewees mention they had to rely heavily on technology and tools such as Zoom and video conferencing during the pandemic, something they had not used before the pandemic.

Organizational performance and productivity

Almost all of the interviewees believe that the pandemic affected their employees' performance, while some indicated that the pandemic had no effect on their employees'

performance. This manifested as a higher proportion of employees not meeting their KPIs, reduced productivity, and increased absenteeism. Remote working was found to cause reduced motivation and enthusiasm. Technological issues were found to have a negative effect on employee performance (see Table 2).

Many respondents indicated that the organization's productivity decreased during this time, while some indicated that the pandemic has had no effect on productivity. The finding suggests that the pandemic effected organizational productivity. Virtual work, including working from home, has many distractions to take concentration away from work, making it easier to lose the thread of work tasks. To do so required additional effort to manage and monitor employees through the use of technology. This placed an added administrative burden on managers who were already faced with the challenges that coping with the effects of the pandemic already presented. It is acknowledged that interviewees offered relatively fewer responses to this question.

Many managers indicated that stress levels among both managers and employees had increased, mainly due to the volatility and uncertainty of the situation worldwide. This volatility sometimes resulted in conflicting information regarding both the pandemic and organizations' reactions to it. Managers were not immune from confusion as mixed messaging filtering down from organizations' top levels sometimes added to the confusion, leaving managers unsure of what to tell their employees. These factors were viewed as contributing to a reduction in productivity. Managers, therefore, reported needing to provide more motivation than they would normally have needed in order to maintain a sufficient productivity level. As would be expected, well-prepared organizations with sophisticated working from home plans for their employees already in place fared better than those with less mature remote working plans.

Discussion and implications

The result of this study echoes that of Novitasari et al. (2020) who found that leaders should regularly brief their employees as a way of motivating them. Doing so will maintain or possibly improve their employees' adaptability, especially during the current pandemic. The work circumstances brought about by the necessary isolation requirements mandated by the government necessitated a change in leadership style commensurate with the circumstances in which organizations were operating. Given that many employees were working virtually from home in isolation, leaders could no longer function using the same leadership style. Instead, leaders were required to engage with and motivate their employees in order to achieve objectives. As employees were not actually visible, workplace leaders needed to exhibit greater confidence in their employees and trust that they were still working to the highest possible capacity, given the limitations that working from home or working remotely were imposing on them. Output from employees was not completely invisible, however. Managers could still monitor their employees' output via electronic means.

While both managers and employees experienced stress, managers had the additional burden of supporting their team members to ensure they were coping mentally and to ensure they remained stable and loyal. As higher performing employees, or those with the potential to do so, are more important organizational assets, managers felt the additional responsibility to maintain their loyalty and stability to ensure they were able to continue their advanced contributions to the organization.

The situation caused by the pandemic had taken its toll on employees' emotions. They were concerned, not only about their own safety, but also the safety of their families and friends. Many of the employees had older parents and were particularly concerned about them, as the elderly in the community were at greater risk of serious complications should they have been infected by the virus. Leaders needed to manage employees' concerns and emotions and keep them occupied with work-related tasks to help manage their employees' concerns and also to maintain organizational progress toward objectives. This supports previous studies which found that epidemics and pandemics produce feelings of anxiety and panic (Chatterjee et al., 2020) and that of Kihara and Mugambi (2018), who noted that stress creates feelings of tension and anxiety in many aspects of life.

The study shows that the pandemic had an effect on organizations' directions. This finding is consistent with that of AlMazrouei and Zacca (2021) who found that managers viewed the pandemic as having affected their organization's direction and, because of this, their decision-making because their original plans were devised before the pandemic. What has been exposed by the current circumstances is the fragility of organizations that are not prepared for eventualities. The more proactive organizations that already had work from home plans in place were able to take advantage by being able to implement their plans immediately, while those without a plan such as this first had to create the plan, then put the infrastructure in place, and then implement it, thus losing valuable time. This is symbolic of the marketplace generally. Those organizations that are proactive and more agile have always enjoyed greater success in being better able to take advantage of opportunities quickly and create a competitive advantage.

The findings of this study shows that leaders' new role during the pandemic was to encourage their people and to motivate employees to be more productive by developing and implementing a plan to make this happen. Part of the responsibility of managing is to develop and implement plans in anticipation of various circumstances. This is how organizations become more agile. Another important responsibility managers have is to maintain their employees' motivation by encouraging them to be more productive. Managers use a number of different strategies to achieve this, some more successfully than others.

This study shows that the pandemic affected employees' performance. This finding is consistent with that of Novitasari et al. (2020). While staying home from work when experiencing any sign of contagious illness has always been important, it is clearly become more important, given the seriousness of the pandemic. Despite this, many employees have felt the need to come in to work while sick and "soldier on." This may or may not be related to an organization's culture, with some organizations placing an emphasis on results and output over employee welfare.

Almost all organizations would be quick to disclaim this view, however, pointing to the employee health and welfare policies they have in place. Employees presenting at work while displaying symptoms of an infectious illness has always been a problem, however. If these employees infect their colleagues, an organization can lose more employee hours than they would have if the infected employee had remained at home. Again, this comes back to an organization's work from home plans and infrastructure. Employees who are too sick to travel to work but who may still be capable of working virtually from home online can still contribute and "soldier on" without the risk of infecting their colleagues.

This study shows that organizations' productivity had decreased during the pandemic. This is consistent with the finding of AlMazrouei and Zacca (2021) who found that employee productivity has reduced during the pandemic. Their research provides insights into how the pandemic has affected employees' productivity. The finding of this study is not consistent with those of Narayanamurthy and Tortorella (2021), however, which found that productivity and job satisfaction increased when employees work remotely. As the pandemic dragged on and working virtually from home was no longer a pleasure, managers and employees alike tired of the isolation from their work colleagues, preferring instead to be able to address workplace problems and issues on a face-to-face basis.

"Necessity is the mother of invention" has always been a popular phrase. The current circumstances have shown just how true the saying is. While technology has provided many organizations with the option to allow some of their employees to work from home, the pandemic has taken this to a much greater level. While for many years, many of those with home-based businesses and managers, particularly at higher levels, have worked from home, this is now rapidly becoming the norm for employees at lower organizational levels as well. Whether this new norm continues at the current level, or whether organizations will adopt a new normal lying somewhere between the old and new norms remain to be seen. One aspect of the new working remotely from home norm is the amount of distractions present that can take employees' minds off their work. Until the new norm of working virtually from home becomes more embedded, distractions will continue to be a problem.

Theoretical implications

This study adds to the current body of knowledge relating to managerial leadership styles by extending the theory on situational leadership to incorporate an adaptive style during exceptional circumstances. While other leadership styles, such as transformational and transactional, have been widely studied in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic, as far as the author can ascertain, no literature on supportive, informative, and motivational managerial styles have been included in relation to leadership styles during the pandemic. This study has introduced the concept of adaptive leadership during extreme circumstances, proposing that this style be operationalized during such circumstances as the COVID-19 pandemic (WHO, 2020a; WHO, 2020b) as a method of managerial support to employees experiencing stress. This

paper therefore contributes to the literature in this field by doing so.

These styles are also applicable in other longer-term traumatic circumstances, such as natural disasters, wars, and other stressful situations. Given that COVID-19 is still a current situation, clearly defined constructs are yet to be properly established (Narayanamurthy and Tortorella, 2021). As a part of their role as adaptive leaders, managers need to maintain engagement with their employees, motivating them and keeping them informed regarding work-related changes as well as changes in circumstances, and understanding their points of view (Gallagher, 2020) as a way of helping them to manage their stress and anxiety (Gilbert, 2009; Foster, 2017).

There has not been much attention paid to Australian public sector managers and their role in the context of the current pandemic. It is for this reason that this topic is considered to be worthy of further investigation. This study enhances knowledge in the field of management in relation to how the pandemic has impacted public sector leaders generally and offers an insight into the public sector leadership experience during this situation and has been directed toward contingency leadership specifically in relation to the current pandemic and the exceptional challenges it has produced.

Practical implications

Consulting with employees is one of the most important practices that managers can undertake. By doing so, managers provide a mechanism that is more effective and more reliable than the office grapevine, which is what takes over in the vacuum left by insufficient communication and consultation. Even the most basic of office functions can suffer without effective and reliable communication (Feely and Harzing, 2003).

The findings of this research indicate that workplaces would benefit from utilizing the knowledge gained during the pandemic in the post-pandemic situation. HR practitioners will find the results of this study will assist them to develop more appropriate policies and management practices to enable them to more effectively work with their organizations' leaders at all levels to establish more effective communications processes between employees. This will not only support leaders and their organizations and better inform them on the most appropriate courses of action to take in future critical external changes to their workplace environment, but will also assist employees at all levels as it will facilitate their ability to make contributions from remote locations as effective as from their workplace.

It is envisaged that the current COVID-19 pandemic will continue to have an impact on all humanity at all levels for some time to come. It is incumbent on practitioners of HR to support organizational leaders to show their organization in the best possible light by encouraging compassion and kindness. By employing a proactive and strategic approach, HR practitioners can develop employees' and organizations' flexibility during unprecedented challenges.

Planning in advance to determine the most effective responses to a variety of scenarios has been found to significantly assist employee adaptation. This is a practice that has been conducted by many governments throughout the world as a way of developing plans in preparation for a variety of

contingencies. This will assist organizations to be better prepared to react to serious challenges. Organizational leaders also need to be able to retrospectively examine their reactions to previous incidents by eliminating those less than effective responses and retaining the most effective aspects of their plans as a way of continuously improving their responses to future incidents.

Organizational leaders may wish to consider arranging workshops to educate employees to work remotely more effectively, thus reducing the surprise factor for those who have never been required to work in this fashion and help those with some experience of this to be even more effective.

Another way that organizations can become more agile, particularly in response to the current pandemic, is to build greater flexibility into their employees' sick leave arrangements, without compromising productivity. Continuous improvement has always been a hallmark of the more successful organizations. This has mainly been directed toward production; however, applying the principle to employees' sick leave may prove to be another way in which productivity can be enhanced.

Research limitations and future research directions

The use of video conferencing to record interviews was not as successful as hoped owing to the patchy quality of both the video and the audio. It was also difficult to schedule time with some of the leaders as they were time-poor due to their work commitments. Interviewees' self-reporting should also be noted, introducing the possibility of reduced objectivity due to interviewees' interpretations of the situations they described.

It would have been useful to broaden the scope of the research to incorporate the effects of the situation on employees' families and the steps they took to deal with the developing situation. Also, the fact that the sample was taken from a somewhat homogenous group may have limited the results of this study. Selecting participants from a more diverse population would have yielded more useful results and offered more opportunities to make comparisons.

There is also an opportunity for future researchers to undertake quantitative studies in the public and private sectors to compare the impact of the pandemic on leadership styles between both sectors, identify the approaches used by leaders to assist them in handling the situation, and compare the effects of the pandemic on employee performance in each sector.

Comparing which leadership strategies were most successful as well as comparing strategies in different industrial sectors would be worthwhile in a future study. It would also be instructive to compare productivity between departments and how this was achieved. A comparison of employee performance across a variety of organizations in different sectors may provide interesting insights and opportunities for further investigation.

Conclusion

This study investigated the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on leadership within Australian public sector organizations during the situation. A qualitative methodology was employed for this research consisting of semi-structured interviews with 50 managers. The study results suggest COVID-19 effected leadership style, employees' emotions and stress, and organizational performance, productivity, and adaptability. Changing leadership style to supportive, informative, and motivational to match the change in situation was found to be effective.

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