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Article

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LEADING DURING CRISIS: LEADERSHIP IMPERATIVES AND HUMAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT LESSONS FROM THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract

The Coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) constituted one of the most profound leadership and Human Resource Development (HRD) challenges of the modern era. Beyond its public health implications, the pandemic exposed deep structural vulnerabilities in organizations while simultaneously accelerating transformations in work, leadership, and skill formation. This article develops a theoretically grounded and practice-informed analysis of crisis leadership during COVID-19, integrating sensemaking theory, adaptive leadership, and complexity leadership perspectives. Adopting a conceptual and reflective scholarship methodology, the paper synthesized contemporary crisis leadership literature with practitioner insights drawn from the pandemic experience. It advanced four core leadership imperatives - acting with urgency, responding productively, communicating transparently, and updating constantly - as dynamic capabilities essential for organizational resilience. The article further argued that crises function as developmental inflection points for HRD, creating a "burning platform" for accelerated learning, digital transformation, and workforce reskilling. By linking crisis leadership theory to HRD outcomes, the paper contributed to Human Resource Development policy and strategy by offering an integrative framework that informs leadership development, organizational learning, and post-crisis renewal.

Keywords: Crisis leadership, Human Resource Development, COVID-19 Pandemic, Leadership Imperatives.

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Introduction

The Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus and primarily, results in mild to moderate respiratory illness, but can lead to severe complications, especially in older adults and individuals with underlying health conditions. The pandemic represents an inflection point in the study and practice of leadership and Human Resource Development (HRD). Rarely has a single event simultaneously disrupted public health systems, labor markets, organizational routines, and social institutions on a global scale. For leaders and HRD professionals, the pandemic created conditions of radical uncertainty in which established plans, competencies, and assumptions rapidly became obsolete. Leadership research has long emphasized that crises are not merely operational breakdowns but socially constructed events that test meaning, trust, and authority (Boin et al., 2013). During COVID-19, employees, citizens, and stakeholders turned to leaders not only for solutions but for interpretation, seeking answers to fundamental questions about safety, continuity, and the future of work. These dynamics place crisis leadership squarely within the domain of HRD, where learning, adaptation, and capability-building are central concerns. This article reconceptualizes leadership during COVID-19 as a developmental challenge rather than a temporary disruption. It argues that crisis leadership effectiveness is rooted in leaders' ability to enable collective sensemaking, adaptive responses, and learning within complex systems. By strengthening the theoretical framing and explicitly situating the discussion within HRD scholarship, the paper extends existing crisis leadership literature and responds to calls for integrative, theory-informed contributions in *Human Resource discourse*.

Theoretical Foundations for Crisis Leadership

Sensemaking Theory and Crisis Leadership: Sensemaking theory posits that individuals and groups construct meaning retrospectively to navigate ambiguity and uncertainty (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). Crises disrupt taken-for-granted assumptions, triggering a collapse of meaning that requires active interpretation and narrative reconstruction. Leadership during crises, therefore, is fundamentally about shaping sensemaking processes. During the COVID-19 pandemic, leaders who provided coherent narratives—acknowledging uncertainty while articulating purpose and direction—helped stabilize organizational sensemaking. Transparent communication, frequent updates, and visible decision rationales reduced anxiety and enabled coordinated action. From an HRD perspective, sensemaking is inseparable from learning, as employees reinterpret roles, identities, and competencies in response to changing realities.

Adaptive Leadership: Adaptive leadership theory distinguishes between technical problems, which can be solved using existing expertise, and adaptive challenges, which require new learning and behavioral change (Heifetz, Grashow, & Linsky, 2009). COVID-19 was predominantly an adaptive challenge. No established playbook existed, and leaders were required to mobilize learning across organizational levels. Adaptive leadership during the pandemic involved experimentation, rapid feedback, and tolerance for error. Leaders who framed the crisis as a shared learning problem—rather than a command-and-control exercise—enabled employees to contribute ideas and innovations. For HRD, this underscores the importance of fostering learning agility, psychological safety, and reflective practice as core leadership competencies.

Complexity Leadership Theory: Complexity leadership theory views organizations as complex adaptive systems characterized by nonlinearity, emergence, and interdependence

(Uhl-Bien, Marion, & McKelvey, 2007). In such systems, leadership is not confined to formal authority but emerges through interactions that enable adaptation and innovation. The COVID-19 crisis amplified system complexity, as health risks, technological shifts, and human factors interacted unpredictably. Effective leaders facilitated adaptive dynamics by enabling collaboration, decentralizing decision-making, and supporting emergent solutions. HRD plays a critical role in such contexts by designing systems that enhance connectivity, learning, and adaptive capacity across the organization.

Methodology

This article adopts a conceptual and reflective scholarship methodology. Rather than reporting empirical data, the paper integrates established theory with reflective insights derived from leadership practice during the COVID-19 pandemic. The analysis draws on three primary data sources and analytical approach:

- i. Peer-reviewed crisis leadership and HRD literature, particularly sensemaking, adaptive leadership, and complexity leadership frameworks.
- ii. Scholarly and practitioner analyses of leadership during COVID-19 published between 2020 and 2023.
- iii. Reflective practitioner insights derived from organizational leadership and HR practice during the pandemic.

These sources were synthesized using an integrative review approach, identifying recurring themes and mapping them onto HRD-relevant leadership capabilities. This approach aligns with conceptual scholarship standards that emphasize theory development, integration, and practical relevance.

Contributions to HRD Scholarship

This article contributes to human resource development scholarship in several important and interrelated ways. First, it advances crisis leadership as a core HRD concern, rather than a peripheral leadership topic. While crisis leadership has traditionally been examined within public administration, emergency management, and general leadership studies, this paper repositions it squarely within HRD by demonstrating that effective crisis leadership is fundamentally a learning, capability-building, and sensemaking challenge. In doing so, the article responds directly to longstanding calls in HRD literature for greater engagement with complex, real-world leadership problems. Second, the paper contributes theoretically by integrating sensemaking theory, adaptive leadership, and complexity leadership into a coherent HRD-relevant framework. Existing HRD research often draws on these theories in isolation. This article synthesizes them to show how leadership during crisis operates simultaneously at cognitive (sensemaking), behavioral (adaptive action), and systemic (complexity) levels. This integrative framing extends HRD theory by illuminating how learning and development processes unfold under extreme uncertainty and time pressure.

Third, the article enriches HRD scholarship by conceptualizing the four leadership imperatives—urgency, productive response, transparent communication, and constant updating—as dynamic developmental capabilities rather than static competencies. This reconceptualization challenges traditional competency-based leadership development models and aligns with emerging HRD perspectives that emphasize adaptability, learning agility, and continuous development. It suggests that HRD interventions should focus less on skill acquisition alone and more on cultivating leaders' capacity to learn in action. Fourth, the paper contributes to HRD practice-oriented theory by framing crises as developmental inflection points for individuals, leaders, and organizations. By introducing the notion of

crisis as a “burning platform” for accelerated learning and reskilling, the article extends HRD discussions on organizational learning, workforce transformation, and digital capability development. This perspective positions HRD not merely as a support function during crises but as a strategic enabler of organizational resilience and post-crisis renewal. Finally, the article makes a methodological contribution by exemplifying conceptual and reflective scholarship as a legitimate and rigorous approach for advancing HRD theory. By systematically linking crisis leadership theory and practice insights from the COVID-19 context, the paper demonstrates how reflective analysis can generate transferable theoretical insights suitable for advancing both research and practice.

Core Leadership Imperatives During Crisis

The four leadership imperatives identified in this paper - acting with urgency, responding productively, communicating transparently, and updating constantly- should not be understood as discrete behaviors. Rather, they constitute an integrated and dynamic capability set that enables leaders to mobilize learning, coordination, and adaptation within crisis conditions. From an HRD perspective, these imperatives represent developable leadership capacities embedded in organizational learning systems rather than innate traits.

Acting with Urgency: Temporal Sensemaking and Decisive Learning

Acting with urgency during crisis is fundamentally a temporal sensemaking process. Crises collapse time horizons, forcing leaders to make consequential decisions without the benefit of complete information. Sensemaking theory suggests that early actions serve as cues that shape collective interpretations of threat, competence, and intent (Weick et al., 2005). In the COVID-19 context, leaders who acted decisively by instituting safety protocols, transitioning to remote work, or reconfiguring operations, provided employees with psychological anchors that reduced ambiguity. From an HRD standpoint, urgency is not synonymous with impulsiveness. Rather, it reflects the capacity for rapid learning cycles, where leaders test provisional actions, observe outcomes, and adjust accordingly. Organizations that had invested in leadership development emphasizing judgment under uncertainty and reflective practice were better positioned to balance speed with learning.

Responding Productively: Adaptive Capacity and Human Capital Mobilization

Responding productively refers to leaders’ ability to mobilize human, social, and cognitive resources toward problem-solving rather than blame avoidance. Adaptive leadership theory underscores that crises such as COVID-19 are not technical problems amenable to expert-driven solutions but adaptive challenges requiring collective learning (Heifetz et al., 2009). Productive responses during the pandemic were evident in organizations that empowered cross-functional teams, encouraged experimentation, and legitimized learning from failure. HRD systems played a critical enabling role by supporting rapid reskilling, redefining performance expectations, and fostering psychological safety. In this sense, productive response is inseparable from HRD’s mandate to cultivate learning-oriented cultures.

Communicating Transparently: Trust, Psychological Safety, and Learning

Transparent communication emerged as one of the most consequential leadership behaviors during COVID-19. Crises amplify information asymmetries and rumor propagation, making communication a central mechanism of sensemaking and trust-building. Leaders who communicated frequently, honestly, and empathetically enabled employees to align their interpretations with organizational realities. From an HRD perspective, transparent communication contributes directly to psychological safety, a condition necessary for learning and voice. By acknowledging uncertainty and explaining decision rationales, leaders

modeled learning-oriented behavior and legitimized questioning and feedback. Conversely, inconsistent or opaque communication undermined trust and impeded adaptive learning.

Updating Constantly: Learning-in-Action and System Adaptation

Updating constantly reflects leaders' capacity for continuous learning and adaptation in complex systems. Complexity leadership theory emphasizes that in nonlinear environments, effective leadership requires iterative adjustment rather than static planning (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). During the pandemic, policies related to health, work design, and performance management required frequent revision as conditions evolved. For HRD, constant updating underscores the importance of feedback-rich systems, data-informed decision-making, and reflective learning practices. Leaders who treated policies and strategies as provisional hypotheses, subject to revision through learning, enabled organizations to remain agile and resilient.

Crisis as a Human Resource Development Opportunity

Crises function as developmental accelerators. COVID-19 forced organizations to confront skill gaps, leadership deficiencies, and outdated work systems. Rather than aiming to "return to normal," forward-looking leaders leveraged the crisis as a catalyst for transformation. The rapid shift to digital work exposed the urgency of reskilling and lifelong learning. HRD professionals were central to enabling this transition by designing virtual learning systems, supporting leaders in new work arrangements, and embedding reflective learning practices. In this sense, the pandemic transformed HRD from a support function into a strategic capability.

Implications for HRD Research and Practice

For HRD scholars, the pandemic underscores the need for research that integrates leadership theory with learning, development, and capability-building outcomes. Crisis contexts offer fertile ground for examining how sensemaking, adaptation, and complexity unfold in real time. For practitioners, the findings suggest that crisis leadership capabilities should be embedded systematically in leadership development, succession planning, and organizational learning architectures. HRD must move beyond static competency models toward cultivating adaptive, reflective, and system-aware leaders capable of operating under persistent uncertainty.

Propositions for Future Research

This conceptual article advances several propositions to guide future empirical and theory-building research in the area of crisis leadership as it relates to HRD:

- i. **Proposition 1:** Leadership behaviors that enhance collective sensemaking during crises (e.g., transparent communication and frequent updating) are positively associated with employee learning orientation and psychological safety.
- ii. **Proposition 2:** Adaptive leadership practices that emphasize experimentation and shared problem-solving during crises positively influence organizational resilience and post-crisis capability development.
- iii. **Proposition 3:** HRD systems that support rapid learning cycles and reskilling moderate the relationship between crisis intensity and workforce performance outcomes.
- iv. **Proposition 4:** Organizations that institutionalize post-crisis reflective learning processes are more likely to convert crisis experiences into sustained leadership and human capital advantages.

These propositions invite mixed-methods and longitudinal research designs capable of capturing dynamic leadership-learning interactions across crisis phases.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic reaffirmed that leadership effectiveness in crisis is inseparable from learning, adaptation, and meaning-making. By integrating sensemaking, adaptive leadership, and complexity leadership theories, this article positions crisis leadership as a core concern of human resource development. Crises, while disruptive, offer unparalleled opportunities for growth. Organizations that institutionalise learning from such moments will be better prepared for an increasingly uncertain future.

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