

# Leading with heart: academic leadership during the COVID-19 crisis

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## Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted every sphere of life. It has brought into sharp focus not only the critical role that leaders have to play in taking charge of their organisations and employees, but the complexity of that leadership role, too. The authors of this paper are both psychologists who occupy leadership positions in a university. The paper briefly explores the evolution of leadership theory, leadership in times of crises, generally, and leadership during the time of COVID-19. In addition, one of the authors offers a personal note on the leadership experience during COVID-19. What became clear during the reflections was that empathy, vulnerability, self-awareness and agility were some of the qualities needed during this crisis. In addition, the psychodynamic concept of containment appears very relevant in managing the affective intensity experienced by staff and students. Leaders were expected to not only fully understand the meaning of empathy and compassion, but to know how to sincerely demonstrate these qualities to staff and students alike. While these qualities should be expected of all leaders at all times, the pandemic brought them into sharper focus. We believe that we have benefitted from our training in psychology as these qualities of caring, empathy and self-awareness are embedded and sharpened in our training programmes.

## Keywords

Containment, COVID-19, empathic leadership, leadership

To believe you are magnificent.

And gradually to discover that you are not magnificent.

Enough labor for one lifetime. (Czeslaw Milosz)

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Sen (2020) believes that the Nobel Prize winning Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz captures in 19 words the human struggle to find a genuine understanding of self. Typically, the process of realising that we are not magnificent takes a lifetime. Yet COVID-19 has accelerated that process like no other, making us aware of just how vulnerable and fallible we all are – and that artificial hierarchies that societies have created are exactly that – artificial. Crossing all existing and varied boundaries to reveal how connected we all are, COVID-19 has become the greatest leveller of all times. It has forced us to sit up and take note of how we approach our responsibilities of leadership, which may have been built upon the concept of hierarchy where leaders lead, and followers follow. The pandemic is requiring us to unlearn old behaviours, teachings, and philosophies, and relearn skills and attitudes from scratch. It has exposed our collective vulnerabilities thereby making us stronger, together, demonstrating that no one can remain unscathed, whether directly or indirectly, by the virus. COVID-19 has revealed, according to Sen (2020), that constructs such as first-world and third-world exist only in our imaginations; that ultimately it is the virus that remains triumphant. It is only once we accept that COVID-19 actually unites us that we can be strong in our collective weakness. This realisation will then direct us to re-think how we lead those who look to us for guidance and direction.

## The evolution of leadership

The evolution of leadership theory, straddling cultures, decades, and theoretical beliefs – from early trait-based studies, through situational, transactional and transformational leadership, to more current theories, such as integrative leadership theory – has been the focus of discussion, research and debate for centuries (Maslanka, 2004; Yukl, 2013). The modern leader has to deal with issues that some of the established leadership theories (while having some validity) do not address. Shah (2020) summarises these as follows:

- Traits theory (originally mooted in the 19th century) suggested that leaders are born and not made;
- Behavioural styles theory (first mentioned in the 1960s) used a managerial grid model that assumes a slower world pace – it may not be as suited to 21st century organisations as other more flexible approaches;
- The majority of situational and contingency theories assume that leaders can simply flick a switch and adopt different behaviours; while
- Functional theories (e.g., Action-Centred Leadership) assume that leaders apply leadership behaviour as needed, regardless of their personality.

Shah (2020) has touched on how theories of the past may not be fully applicable in the 21st century, or more specifically, in crisis-situations. As we acquire more knowledge and experience we continue to grow, to evolve. Our experiences demand up-to-date, relevant and contextually bound responses. The theoretical road-map above is evidence in itself that we need to constantly interpret our environments, be bold about what changes are required, and be flexible and astute to make those shifts. The notion that leaders were born not made, or that only men made good leaders, or that leaders possessed super-human abilities to be able to adapt to any situation revealed that the shelf-life of theories was limited only until the flaws were revealed. While the above theories, relevant for their times and contexts, offered valuable insights, they should be viewed as springboards for further enhancements and developments. The pandemic provided a valuable lesson in acknowledging that the above leadership theories would not be fully applicable in their own right. A combination or perhaps a consolidation of past leadership theories giving rise to a new approach to leading during a crisis became essential.

The understanding that a combination of factors is responsible for individuals rising up to the challenge of leading is favoured among the majority of leadership theorists of the 21st century (Avolio et al., 2009, 2014; Denis et al., 2012; Kouzes & Posner, 2008; Selladurai, 2006). These theorists maintain that personality, education, experience, exposure and prevailing conditions are some of the factors that contribute towards how individuals lead. Add a crisis to the mix and leading can take on a new dimension. The nature of the crisis being experienced, as well as the type of organisation responding to the crisis further compounds the leadership role.

## **Leadership during times of crisis**

While one could argue that leadership in times of crisis is simply good leadership put under pressure (Lawton-Misra, 2019), the unfamiliar context, the fast-changing nature of the environment, the multiplicity of actions and interactions, the speed at which decisions need to be made, and the possibly life-saving implications of these, add new layers of complexity. Crises, according to Bundy and Pfarrer (2015) are sources of uncertainty, disruption, and change, requiring leaders to take actions that bring about immediate change in behaviour, beliefs, and outcomes. Leading during a crisis requires leaders to be agile and resilient, and open to the challenges that the crisis brings. The uniqueness of each crisis also demands different skillsets. D'Auria and De Smet (2020, p. 2) claim that what leaders need during a crisis is not a predefined response plan, but behaviours and mindsets that will prevent them from overreacting to yesterday's developments and help them look ahead. Agility and resilience are therefore critical qualities that leaders should possess in steering an organisation during a crisis.

Integrative leadership theory which concludes that the leader, the follower, and the situation all influence leadership effectiveness (Marriner-Tomey, 2009) may be more relevant during crises. Leaders need to be aware of their own behaviour and its influence on others, recognise individual differences among their followers (characteristics and motivations), understand the structures available to perform specific tasks, and analyse the situational variables that impact the ability of followers to complete tasks, including environmental factors. According to Selladurai (2006), effective leadership may be influenced by the leadership traits of the leader (person), situational context (organisation), and the strategies (practice) employed by the leader. With integrative leadership, the leader considers all of these factors using a holistic approach to self and others, and adjusts his or her leadership style through adaptive behaviour (Marriner-Tomey, 2009). Gentry et al. (2016) states that leaders today need to be more person-focused to lead people, collaborate with others, be able to cross organisational and cultural boundaries and need to create shared direction, alignment, and commitment between social groups with very different histories, perspectives, values, and cultures.

The South African higher education sector experienced its first post-apartheid national crisis during the #FeesMustFall protests in 2015, and again in 2016. This crisis may have re-shaped leadership approaches in that sector by bringing into focus the lack of crisis leadership experience academic leaders had in responding to crises, especially in 2015. Many lessons were learnt, unlearnt and relearnt from 2015 to 2016. In 2016, academic leaders realised the need for and value of collaboration and a collective response to the crisis. A second significant lesson was the importance of distributive leadership across institutions. The leadership node could no longer remain within the higher echelons of a hierarchical system. Acknowledging that expertise resided among various individuals across the institution made academic leaders appreciate the importance of relinquishing power and enabling and empowering people across the organisation to manage certain situations, with the skills and expertise they possessed (Lawton-Misra, 2019). This approach was supported by Boin et al. (2005), who believed that the illusion of control (top-down, linear,

straightforward) may be irrelevant within the context of contemporary crises, and the question 'Who is the leader?' is of less value in the face of a major crisis than the question, 'How is leadership best distributed and coordinated to deal with this crisis?' In other words, crises require democratic structures, not bureaucratic ones, so that responsibility for effort can appropriately reside with those best placed to effect rapid resolution of the crisis.

## Leading during COVID-19

So what special characteristics are required from academic leaders during this COVID-19 crisis? Are the lessons learnt during the #FEM crisis of 2015 and 2016 still relevant? Or should leaders once more unlearn and relearn behaviours to lead during this crisis? Navigating the work environment during this particular crisis demanded additional skills and competencies of leaders. Leaders had to demonstrate qualities of empathy, compassion, mindfulness and sensitivity. An innate understanding of the uniqueness of how each person experiences trauma was essential to know that a one-size-fits-all response could not be applied. Acknowledging people's different personal circumstances and different responses to the crisis required leaders to be attuned to employees at a personal level.

Two important lessons as cited above were relinquishing control, and collective leadership. D'Auria and De Smet (2020) argue that during a crisis, leaders must relinquish the belief that a top-down response will engender stability. Similarly, moving away from a top-down leadership style to a more distributive approach became necessary during the COVID-19 crisis. In routine emergencies, the authors maintain, the typical organisation can rely on its command-and-control structure to manage operations well by carrying out scripted responses. However, in crises, characterised by uncertainty, leaders usually face problems that are unfamiliar and sudden. Expecting a small group of executives at the organisation's highest level to collect information or make decisions quickly enough to respond effectively becomes difficult. Making connections with people at all levels of the institution during a crisis, allows the leader to be truly transformative and the collaboration to be meaningful (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020). Within the higher education space academic leaders had to adapt the learning and teaching environment to respond to the fluidity of the situation. The devastating effects of the pandemic gave rise to uncertainty, panic, anxiety and a range of other emotions as the enormity of the fragility of lives and job losses become a reality. Nations going into lock-down meant a severed economy, and many livelihoods were on the line. While South African academic leaders had to make quick decisions on how to salvage the academic year within constantly evolving circumstances, they also had to be aware of the emotional trauma and impact the pandemic was having on employees' and students' personal lives. Equally important was cascading the leadership functions through every layer of the organisation in an attempt to harness the expertise residing across the institution.

Bolden (2020) supports the above stating that while there is a tendency to equate 'leadership' with the traits and behaviours of individual 'leaders' the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates the need for individuals and groups to work concurrently and collaboratively in order to achieve leadership outcomes. It has become necessary to dispense with the idea of a leader/follower binary, and to maximise on contributions many more individuals can make. Kezar and Holcombe (2017) believe that institutions operating on a shared leadership model may benefit from a greater degree of agility, innovation, and collaboration in a crisis than those institutions which cling to an outdated and inflexible hierarchical leadership paradigm. This is especially true during this pandemic since no one is immune to the virus and leaders may not always be available to lead. An example of this was when UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson contracted the virus and had to go into quarantine, members of his cabinet had to step in and lead. Shared leadership, Kezar and Holcombe (2017) state, recognises

the importance of leaders in positions of authority, but focuses on how those in positions of power can delegate authority, capitalise on expertise within the organisation, and create infrastructure so that organisations can capitalise on the leadership of multiple people. Empowering others to discover and implement solutions can be helpful and boosts confidence.

The COVID-19 pandemic while highlighting the need for strong, decisive leadership, also called for leaders to display self-awareness, compassion, empathy, vulnerability and agility – characteristics that not all individuals in leadership roles may naturally possess. D’Auria et al. (2020) agree that in a business-as-usual environment, compassionate leaders perform better and foster more loyalty and engagement by their teams. However, how they maintain that compassion becomes especially critical during a crisis, because while the first few days of a crisis might require leaders to put their heads down and exhibit control, it is just as critical to tune in to personal fears and anxieties, their own as well as those of their employees.

Decisive leadership was required at the onset of the crisis because a great deal rested on the decisions that institutions took in order to survive and to support their staff and those experiencing loss and uncertainty in the organisation. Once leaders passed the initial decision-making stage ensuring sustainability of the organisation, other layers emerged, such as having to deal with a plethora of emotions that employees and students were experiencing. These ranged from feelings of anxiety, fear, uncertainty and loss, to coping with physical distancing from loved ones, loneliness, and in some cases death. It became incumbent of leaders to possess the requisite skills necessary to emotionally contain those they were leading, while simultaneously taking care of their own emotions. As psychologists we propose that the psychodynamic concept of affective containment is crucial to leading with heart. Based on the seminal work of Bion (1961) and originally meant to describe the conditions necessary for successful psychoanalysis, it has also been used in the leadership and management literature (e.g., Gallos, 2008; Heifetz & Heifetz, 1994) as well as educational settings (Dale & James, 2015). Affective containment is defined as

the name given to the structures and processes that enable the effective receptiveness of feelings, give opportunities for reflection on affective experience and learning, and enable feelings to be harnessed and the insights gained from affective experience to be used productively. (Dale & James, 2015, p. 97)

This concept is applied by Dale and James (2015) to describe how educational organisations can deal with the affective intensity generated by organisational change. More specifically, they highlight the leadership responsibility for providing affective containment. Through containment leaders enable feelings and thoughts to be validated and managed. Equally important, Iszatt-White and Ralph (2016) ask the question ‘Who contains the container’ and underscore the importance of leadership interventions in ensuring that leaders also have a support structure. In this regard, they highlight the potential consequences of the absence of containment for leader well-being and effective decision-making.

Another psychological concept that should be regarded as critical during this pandemic is that of empathy. During this period, leaders needed to be empathetic to employees’ circumstances and experiences, and to be able to turn outward to help employees and colleagues grapple with their reactions. As organisations transition to the new normal, Bick et al. (2020) believe that it is important to acknowledge that some employees may be facing other pressures at home, leading to feelings of isolation and insecurity. Empathy, therefore, becomes a crucial tool offering a way to connect, promote inclusiveness, and create a sense of community in a void of physical interaction. Feelings of empathy, defined by Buchko et al. (2013, p. 32) as the ability to ‘relate to employees and sense what is going on in the employees’ world and the emotions employees are experiencing’, became the most valued characteristic in the workplace. This was clearly demonstrated by Jacinda

Adern, Prime Minister of New Zealand, as she regularly reached out to the people of New Zealand with words of empathy and comfort, and messages to *'Be Kind'* (Spiller, 2020), thereby winning their support in the decisions she made to combat the spread of the virus. While Adern was able to naturally turn inwards and translate her own vulnerabilities as to what those around her may be experiencing, not all leaders are able to do this organically. Some level of training which increases self-awareness and awareness of others may be essential in being able to reach out sincerely.

## **The psychologist as leader in the time of COVID-19**

Choosing between 'health and wealth' during this pandemic required leaders to be pragmatic yet sensitive, decisive yet agile, bureaucratic yet flexible. While leaders during this crisis were expected to adopt new behaviours and skills it was equally important to identify their own vulnerabilities since they (and their loved ones) were not immune to the effects of the virus. Leaders can set the tone for healing by expressing vulnerability and sharing personal fears, concerns, and uncertainties. When people exhibit fear and a desire for protection and self-preservation, leaders validate those feelings as normal. According to D'Auria and De Smet (2020) another crucial part of the leader's role, especially in the emotional, tense environment that characterises a crisis, is promoting psychological safety so people can openly discuss ideas, questions, and concerns without fear of repercussions. This leads to sense-making and an understanding of the situation, and how to handle it. What is needed during crises is for leaders to project compassion and to acknowledge that individuals react differently to challenging situations. Projecting compassion requires a healthy sense of self, and developing this sense of self often requires some training.

Boyatzis et al. (2020) believes that this is a time for leaders to try to invoke or provoke a degree of reflection, spending time to talk about a shared sense of purpose and core values while also spending time to emotionally check in. Instinct and intuition are both needed during this time and leaders need to lead with their mind, heart, gut and soul. Leading with heart implies that leaders are aware, mindful and recognise the importance of responding to employees holistically. When this pandemic is over and leaders sit back and take stock, counting their gains and losses the most important measurement of their performance will be how they treated their people.

As can be seen from the above, the key qualities thus required from leaders in the current pandemic are empathy, decisiveness, caring, compassion, self-reflection, trustworthiness, awareness of personal vulnerability and a healthy sense of self. These qualities we know are found in most graduate attributes of postgraduate psychology programmes all over the world. Indeed, the evaluation of students for selection into professional psychology masters' programmes often includes screening for these qualities. This is not to imply that psychologists are better leaders during a pandemic since these qualities may also be present even in leaders who are not psychologists. However, since these qualities are deeply embedded in our education and training programmes, it is a skill set we can draw on.

## **A personal experience by the first author**

Never before has Maslow's hierarchy of needs been more relevant than during this pandemic period. As a member of the leadership team at a university I've had firsthand experience of navigating this COVID-19 tumultuous terrain. What surfaced was the presence of a myriad of emotions and responses among colleagues. Being a trained psychologist, I was fortunate to be able to identify what lay behind the understandable stoic facades of bravery and strength. Fear for their own and their loved ones' safety from infection, anxiety over job losses and resultant loss of self-esteem and self-worth, financial distress, heartbreaking physical distancing from elderly parents and other

loved ones, the threatening presence of comorbidities, were all very real. Add to that additional responsibilities of home-schooling, sharing working spaces with partners, spouses, children and other family members, limited access to digital platforms and unconducive living and working environments – each person's lived reality had to be considered. Any expectation that individuals would be able to fully focus on work commitments went out the window as I began to sense feelings of fear, anxiety, helplessness, and in some instances, hopelessness.

As Maslow had theorised with his hierarchy of needs the ability to remain motivated and driven requires that each level of the hierarchy is fulfilled before an individual can move up to the next level. As a leader it was imperative for me to understand the psychological underpinnings of behaviour in my teams. Once this was achieved it became easier to garner their support for the work that had to continue. Adapting deadlines and expectations of productivity, recognising those who were more emotionally present and strong, and acknowledging that the impact of emotions is experienced differently by everyone were some of the adjustments I needed to make in my leadership style. It was important to regularly reach out – whether to simply check-in or to provide reassurance and support. A kind word, an available ear, a broad shoulder, an enquiry about their loved ones were all appreciated and effective in keeping the team focused and willing to contribute to the larger institutional need for survival. An important discovery early on was that my own levels of stress and anxiety were significantly reduced by reaching out to my teams. My messages of concern and comfort resonated with similar messages to me, thereby motivating me to continue.

Sincerity and compassion were two important qualities needed during this crisis. Having a holistic knowledge and understanding of each colleague, their circumstances, strengths, psyches, and needs also assisted in ensuring that each person was responded to in ways that matched their uniqueness. It helped me connect with each person at a level that made sense to them and to me, and sharing my own fears and anxieties assisted them in relieving some of the tension they were feeling. Knowing that we are all vulnerable placed us on par with one another – with no artificial barriers creating hierarchies. We connected at a level that implied we were all connected – as humans.

Psychology training focuses on developing qualities of self-awareness, listening, intuition, and being non-judgmental. The pandemic has revealed that the presence of these qualities in me as a leader was necessary and valuable in fostering cooperation among employees.

My experience of students gave me further insights into the daily struggles that many faced. The constant stream of enquiries and pleas to return to campus because of unconducive living conditions and other personal challenges sharpened my appreciation for the experiences our students have on a daily basis. This understanding would be meaningless if it cannot be extended beyond this pandemic. Understanding the plight of many students forced me, and the entire leadership team, to continue making every effort to support learning and teaching, a goal that was reflective of the values of the university. Knowing that education holds the key to a better quality of life is sufficient to not allow this pandemic to be victorious. The maxim that education is transformative never rang truer, and the need to do everything possible to allow our students to complete their studies while remaining compassionate became a common goal.

The leadership collectively began refocusing our efforts and energies to create opportunities that would allow for maximum academic participation by all students. It was imperative to consider creative ways of engaging with students, of reaching all of them, of devising a scaffolded participation model by re-engineering the academic calendar to include 'catch-up' sessions for those who required assistance with access. *No student will be left behind* became the leadership's mantra. This in itself was testimony of the deep awareness of the duty of care that university leaders needed to possess.

Thinking back on those early moments in March, I sit in wonderment at the speed at which events unfolded. As an executive team, we realised the need to establish a COVID-19 Advisory Team, which I led. The team comprised of science experts, a medical practitioner, and staff representing key areas of the University. Its responsibilities included monitoring the outbreak internationally and locally, looking at trends and interventions, understanding the science, advising and comforting those who were at risk of being infected, drafting communiques to keep the campus community and other stakeholders informed, and advising the executive team on best practice, all within our own contextual realities. Other teams worked on instantly vacating student residences and related logistics, liaising with the national Department of Higher Education and Training to ensure that decisions were in line with sectoral approaches, and general health and safety matters for all students and staff. Once the national lockdown was announced the University had less than a week to take care of logistics and ensure that measures that were implemented did not impact negatively on anyone. The next step was how to continue working from home amid the angst of the unknown. One thing was clear – we needed colleagues from across the institution to come together (virtually) to fathom alternative ways of operating. The need for creative thinking, an openness to listening to anyone who may have ideas of how to proceed, and the realisation that expertise resided across the organisation were important lessons. Leadership models of the past where linear approaches may have been effective had to be abandoned in exchange for more distributive and integrative models.

Self-awareness and holistic awareness of others – recognising that each one of us is an accumulation of body, mind, spirit and heart – are necessary qualities in leaders. Possessing an astute awareness of one's own strengths and limitations requires a level of maturity and emotional intelligence that develops over years. Self-awareness reflects the ability to see oneself clearly allowing one to form healthy relationships with others. It allows one to recognise one's own strengths as well as vulnerabilities, making one more sensitive, without judgement, to others' vulnerabilities. The self-aware leader is more adept at recognising the impact of his or her words on others, is able to understand the different emotions his or her words can evoke in others, and develop realistic expectations from each member of his or her team. This equates to emotional intelligence, a much-needed quality in leaders.

## Conclusion

The pandemic has highlighted the need for person- and people-oriented leadership with a focus on among others, caring, empathy and compassion. As psychologists, this has been embedded in our education and training and as such, we do have the available skill set. While these are qualities that one should ordinarily expect from leaders, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought it into sharper focus. One can only hope that post this pandemic that all leaders in the higher education sector, and elsewhere, will be more caring, more compassionate and more empathetic.

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