

Leadership during crisis: a multi-sector exploration of perceptions of leadership in Australia

Leadership
during crisis

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to extend our understanding of the concept of crisis leadership based on perceptions of 48 Australian leaders drawn from various sectors including Australian politics, higher education, not-for-profit and corporate sectors.

Design/methodology/approach – This qualitative study employed semi-structured virtual interviews of 48 leaders from Australian politics, higher education, not-for-profit and corporate sectors during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Leximancer text analytics program was used for data analysis.

Findings – Participants perceived effective leadership during a crisis as encompassing four macro themes: leadership as power, leadership as emanating from people, leadership as management and leadership as specific to the organization. While these findings reinforced extant literature on facets of effective leadership, leaders from different sectors differed on the relative importance of some leadership themes and their relevance to specific sectors.

Research limitations/implications – While the data were collected from a convenient sample, our findings from multiple sectors in Australia extend our knowledge on crisis leadership by revealing differences in sectorial perspectives of crisis leadership. Further, these findings help refine the extant traditional explanations of leadership and especially offer an enhanced understanding of leadership during a crisis. Consequently, our findings support future research that could help identify specific attributes of leaders navigating organizational crises. Such future research could subsequently help develop a theory on crisis leadership based on a valid and reliable measurement for assessing crisis leadership effectiveness in diverse organizational settings.

Originality/value – Our study is based on multi-sector data and consequently lays a solid foundation for extending the conceptualization of leadership during crisis, and the need to reconceptualize effective leader attributes useful in crisis contexts. Theoretically, the current study extended recent research on crisis leadership, by examining the conceptualizations of crisis leadership within specific Australian sectors.

Keywords Crisis leadership, Power, People, Management, Organization, Political leaders, Not-for-profit, Higher education, Corporation, COVID-19

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Recent crises, like the Fukushima nuclear plant meltdown, the Deep Horizon oil spill and the continued COVID-19 pandemic, have all strained the functioning of organizations and even



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countries. As such, these crises required speedy and decisive action to contain the potential negative of the crisis. Since these crises were sudden occurrences that required speedy resolution, scholars have often overlooked the important role played by leaders in resolving crises. Notably, organizations grapple with crises like the recent COVID-19 pandemic that triggered volatile business environments, there has been a growing interest on what constitutes effective crisis leadership. While some industries and occupations (e.g. hotels, car hire, higher education, restaurants) faced serious crises during pandemic, others (e.g. pharmaceuticals, IT, electronics) experienced unanticipated windfalls and growth. Therefore, for organizational leaders, understanding how crises impact specific sectors is critical to tailoring effective leadership solutions.

In an organizational context, a crisis encompasses the disruption of normal patterns of corporate activity by a sudden or overpowering and initially uncontrollable event (Riggio and Newstead, 2023a; Seymour and Moore, 2000; Schneider and Ehrhart, 2014). As such, the recent COVID-19 pandemic is an example of a crisis which disrupted people's sense of normalcy, causing people to look for purpose and direction, and posing unprecedented challenges for leaders in different sectors of society, including politics, business, education and not-for-profit organizations. Resulting from the crisis was the absence of face-to-face communication between leaders and team members, coupled with organizational challenges brought by the "digital revolution", thus adding further complexity to organizational leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic. Further, the COVID-19 pandemic shocked individuals and organizations globally, causing widespread disruption across societies around the globe (Garretsen *et al.*, 2023; Laustsen and Olsen, 2022; Seijts *et al.*, 2022). From the above perspective, COVID 19 pandemic has, therefore, been rightly considered a crisis (Dirani *et al.*, 2020; Grint, 2020; Stoller, 2020; Wu *et al.*, 2021).

Clearly, as organizational crises become more "complex, far-reaching, and prevalent in modern times" (Hutchins, 2008, p. 299), it is vital that leaders project themselves and their vision in different situations, even when considering the limited understanding on how, why and when a leader's projected vision may affect their team outcome (Kim *et al.*, 2023). Consequently, it is possible that leaders need additional skills and attributes to function better during times of a crisis. Thus, there is a need to examine the concept of leadership, and to especially to explore what is encapsulated within crisis leadership or leadership during a crisis. Interestingly, there is limited knowledge of what crisis leadership would entail, and the specific attributes necessary to lead organizations during crises (Balasubramanian and Fernandes, 2022; Bundy *et al.*, 2017; Forester *et al.*, 2022).

Building on the extant literature suggesting that effective leadership is essential in determining strategic agendas, policy development, and actions within an organization especially in a crisis (Dirani *et al.*, 2020; Grint, 2020; Kaiser, 2020; Stam *et al.*, 2018; Yukl, 2012), it is feasible that the true test of leadership is how well a leader functions during a crisis (Riggio and Newstead, 2023a, Samad *et al.*, 2023; Wu *et al.*, 2021). Related to this, Wu *et al.* (2021, p. 18) proposed that "despite the progress made in the crisis leadership literature, further investigation is required to advance the field and to better inform leaders of effective means for handling future crisis". Additionally, Seijts *et al.* (2022, p. 127) proposed that, "[t]he COVID-19 pandemic has illuminated the need for effective leadership in the public, private, and not-for-profit sectors, revealing the best and worst in leaders" (Seijts *et al.*, 2022, p. 127).

While crisis leadership and crisis management are different constructs, researchers (e.g. Riggio and Newstead, 2023a) tried to explain these constructs using a variety of theories from the literature such as the chaos theory (Lorenz, 1963), threat rigidity theory (Staw *et al.*, 1981), cognitive resource theory (CRT) (Fiedler and Garcia, 1987), charismatic leadership (Weber, 1947), and complexity leadership theory (Uhl-Bien *et al.*, 2007; Uhl-Bien and Arena, 2017). Yet there is a lack of clear theory on crisis leadership and measurements for measuring elements

of crisis leadership. [Mitroff \(2007\)](#) argued that to lead during a crisis leaders need to be vigilant and prepared. Thus, more studies are needed to better understand leader effectiveness during crisis and lessons may be drawn on crisis leadership from the lived experiences of leaders during this crisis.

Therefore, this study has three objectives. First, the study seeks to unpack the concept of crisis leadership within the context of leaders from diverse organizational settings including Australian politics, not-for-profit organizations, higher education sector (henceforth referred to as HES) and corporate sector within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Second, building on earlier works on crisis leadership ([Garretsen et al., 2023](#); [Lorenz, 1963](#); [Laustsen and Olsen, 2022](#); [Riggio and Newstead, 2023a](#), [Seijts et al., 2022](#); [Staw et al., 1981](#); [Wu et al., 2021](#)) this research seeks to extend our understanding of crisis leadership and has the potential to pave the way for future research on crisis leadership, even facilitating the development of instruments for measuring leadership effectiveness under crisis. By gathering data during the COVID-19 pandemic, our research findings aim to contribute to the theory on crisis leadership by unpacking potential key effective leader attributes during a crisis, and as it relates to the Australian context during the COVID-19 pandemic. Building on recent studies on leadership during crisis (e.g. [Kaiser, 2020](#); [Riggio and Newstead, 2023a](#); [Wu et al., 2021](#)) our research can tease out important perceptions of effective leadership attributes and behaviours during the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, the study seeks to understand relevant themes, relating to leadership behaviour in a crisis, which have potential to inform organizational leader development programs so that they are targeted to enhance leadership effectiveness appropriate for sectoral contexts.

Literature review

Crises negatively impact organizations, leading to a decline in employee job performance, and often threaten the fundamental viability of organization ([Riggio and Newstead, 2023a](#); [Williams et al., 2017](#)). To prevent the demise of the organization, it is vital that organizational leadership pay special attention to emerging crises and develop strategies that overcome crises ([Riggio and Newstead, 2023b](#); [Somer et al., 2016](#); [Sanfuentes et al., 2021](#); [Uhl-bien, 2021](#)).

Admittedly, as the business community becomes more complex, there is a likelihood of more severe and frequent crisis in the days to come ([Forester et al., 2022](#); [James et al., 2011](#)). Additionally, research on crisis denotes it as an unexpected event that is highly disruptive but relevant ([Bundy et al., 2017](#); [Pearson and Clair, 1998](#); [Wu et al., 2021](#)), may have multiple implications depending on the nature of the crisis and the type of the organization. Related to the issue of crisis, recent studies have shown that while factors like job autonomy, job demands, workload, work-life-conflict, perception of job-fit, and availability of resources influence organizational outcomes ([Alawi et al., 2023](#); [Taleb et al., 2023](#); [Kaur and Kaur, 2023](#)), other studies propose that effective leadership impacts both societies and organizations ([Athanasopoulou and Dopson, 2018](#); [Kurtulmus, 2019](#)).

A crisis, often used interchangeably for situations such as disasters, accident, emergencies and a wide range of business problems such as bankruptcy ([Fraher, 2020](#)), has huge impact on performance at the individual, group and organizational levels, and thus, warrants further research. Broadly, crises can generally be described as events that are unexpected, unusual, unpredictable, complex, highly salient, and potentially disruptive ([Bundy et al., 2017](#); [Pearson and Clair, 1998](#); [Riggio and Newstead, 2023a](#); [Wu et al., 2021](#)). A crisis can be human made or naturally occurring ([Pearson and Mitroff, 1993](#); [Riggio and Newstead, 2023a](#)). Crisis can also be immediate (COVID 19 pandemic or 9/11) or slow to emerge such as environmental crisis ([Wang et al., 2009](#)).

Clearly, organizations are often faced with a crisis, described as a highly disruptive but relevant unexpected event (Bundy *et al.*, 2017; Maak *et al.*, 2021; Pearson and Clair, 1998; Wu *et al.*, 2021). Pearson and Clair (1998, p. 60) defined crisis as:

A low probability, high-impact event that threatens the validity of the organization and is characterised by ambiguity of cause, effect, and means of resolution, as well as by a belief that decisions must be made swiftly.

Again, within an organizational context, a crisis can be defined as the disruption of normal patterns of corporate activity by a sudden or overpowering and initially uncontrollable event (Seymour and Moore, 2000; Schneider, 2014). Notably, organizational crisis can be economic, informational, physical, human resources, reputational and psychopathic acts (Hutchins, 2008). From an organizational perspective, Wooten and James (2008) categorized crises as accidents which is a one-off unexpected event, scandals associated with organizational reputation, product safety and health incidents, and finally employee centered crisis. Irrespective of the different categorization of crisis the fact remains that in all of the above situation there is a need for appropriate action or leadership to navigate through the crisis.

Amid the various studies indicating that leadership is vital for organizational success (Burns, 1978; Meindl *et al.*, 1985; Yukl, 2012), researchers have started to explore the concept of crisis leadership and how it manifests within organizations. In most of the literature on leadership, there has not been a great focus on crisis leadership, even though recent studies highlight the importance of exploring crisis leadership. Wu *et al.* (2021, p. 3) argued that “crisis leadership should be regarded as an important domain within leadership research”. Another recent review on crisis leadership (Bundy *et al.*, 2017) mainly focused on crisis management more broadly rather than crisis leadership, while yet another (James *et al.*, 2011) argued that crisis management covered crisis leadership, and a variety of topics that are not necessarily related to leadership. Other scholars have differentiated between crisis management and crisis leadership, clarifying that crisis management does not incorporate core issues of leadership such as:

(1) the effects of crises on the behaviors and perceived attributes of leaders, their leadership styles, and leadership processes, (2) the types of leader characteristics, behaviors, and leadership styles that have been most frequently examined in the crisis context, and (3) how specific levels of leaders, such as top management teams (TMT), respond to crises (Wu *et al.*, 2021, p. 1).

However, there is a difference between crisis management and crisis leadership akin to the subtle difference between management and leadership (Riggio and Newstead, 2023a). Therefore, there is a need to fill focus on explicating the concept of crisis leadership and filling this knowledge gap on crisis leadership in the contemporary leadership literature.

Amongst different conceptualizations of crises, researchers resorted to different theories to explain crisis management and crisis leadership. To better understand crisis leadership, we borrow from the threat rigidity hypothesis (Staw *et al.*, 1981) and explain how organizations respond to crises or challenges. According to the threat rigidity theory, a threat is “an environmental event that has impending negative consequences for the entity” (Staw *et al.*, 1981, p. 50). Discussing crisis leadership from threat-rigidity perspective during COVID 19 pandemic, Garretsen *et al.* (2023, p. 2) proposed that “individuals and organizations react to an external threat with actions that reflect rigidity”. The underlying assumption of the threat-rigidity hypothesis is that in crisis managers and organizations react with rigidity towards a threat (Garretsen *et al.*, 2023). In their research on crisis leadership Riggio and Newstead (2023a) cited of the cognitive resource theory (CRT, Fiedler and Garcia, 1987) which is a two-by-two model that distinguishes between leaders’

experience, intelligence and circumstances. They also referred to the seminal work of Weber (1947) on charismatic leadership, the normal accident theory (NAT), (Perrow, 1999) or a comparative recent works of Uhl-Bien and colleagues (Uhl-Bien *et al.*, 2007; Uhl-Bien and Arena, 2017) on complexity leadership. While Weber (1947) talked about leaders' exceptional qualities or charisma leading to leadership Uhl-Bien and colleagues (Uhl-Bien *et al.*, 2007; Uhl-Bien and Arena, 2017) highlighted a variety of factors happening at the same time, at many levels and across many contexts. Perrow (1999) argued that while centralized leadership is useful for less complex systems, a more decentralized leadership is needed to deal with more complex situation.

Another approach to understanding the impact of crisis on organizations is that advanced by Boin (2006) who argued that agreeing on the nature of a crisis was challenging for practitioners and crisis theorists, and that different theories were required to explain crisis management. Inevitably, some scholars used the chaos theory to describe crisis. In essence, the chaos theory focuses on the qualities of a point where unlike the predictable behaviour of a pendulum, sometimes order moves to disorder or stability moves to instability (Lorenz, 1963). Mitroff (2007) popularly known as "the father of crisis management" argued that an "effective crisis manager anticipates and prepare for all possible disasters and adopt a mindset that bad things will likely happen" (Riggio and Newstead, 2023a, p. 208). Therefore, it is essential to understand the concepts affecting crisis or the elements of crisis leadership which actually influences leadership behaviour in crisis. By identifying key themes and concepts associated with leadership in crisis our research aims to contribute to the advancement of the knowledge in crisis leadership.

In view of the above approaches to crises within organizations, the central purpose of this study was to examine the concept of leadership under crisis and its associated issues based on lived experiences of those leading their organizations during the COVID-19 pandemic in different organizational settings. Specifically, this study aims to build on the limited budding research on effective forms of leadership during crisis (Garretsen *et al.*, 2023; Laustsen and Olsen, 2022; Wu *et al.*, 2021), with a specific interest on perceptions of crisis leadership within several sectors in Australia.

Methods

This study employed a qualitative research methodology and gathered data during the COVID-19 pandemic. Using open-ended questions to gather qualitative data, the researchers asked the overarching question:

Q1. What is leadership in a crisis?

This question was a part of a larger research composed of other questions that explored difficulties of leadership in crisis as well as the identification of key attributes of effective leadership in crisis.

Since the goal of qualitative research is to better understand a phenomenon through the direct experience of persons (Castleberry and Nolen, 2018) our qualitative study was a free-flowing process where researchers collected and interpreted data to offer new insights into a poorly understood phenomenon. The qualitative research methodology was especially suitable as it allowed us to investigate the complex social processes of leadership during a crisis. The qualitative helped us build a comprehensive idea about leadership in a crisis in the natural setting at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. By employing this qualitative approach, we were able to tap into "a source of well-grounded, rich descriptions and explanations of processes in identifiable local contexts" (Braun and Clarke, 2021; Miles *et al.*, 2018). It also facilitated a clear understanding of the effects of and "why" "when", and "how",

a phenomenon occurred (Johnston, 2010). Thus, the methodology enabled us to obtain in-depth lived experiences of leadership from participants based on their experience in different organizational setting. Finally, the study used the Leximancer software to help us make sense of the voluminous qualitative data, and thus allowed us to quantify certain aspects of the studied phenomenon.

Population and sample

A purposeful sampling strategy was employed based on publicly available information. Qualitative data were then collected through semi-structured interviews in 2020–2021 among 48 respondents who held key leadership roles in Australian politics (i.e. Federal and State Ministers, State Premiers, Senators and Member of Parliament), Australian public universities (i.e. Chancellors, Vice Chancellors, Pro-Vice Chancellors, Deans and Deputy Deans), Chief Executive Officers (CEO) of several not-for-profit organizations and senior executives of corporations across Australia. Following the ethics clearance (H14128) participants were contacted based on publicly available information along with an information sheet describing the project, the questions being asked and their rights to contact the researchers for clarification. It was clarified to participants that participation in the research was voluntary, with interviews proceeding only after receiving the consent of the participants.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom and lasted approximately 30 min to an hour. This research is a part of larger research where the interview guide was designed on interviewees' experience of leadership prior to and during the pandemic, their understanding of leadership, their lived experience on leadership challenges, their perception of effective leadership attributes and behaviours. Prompts were used based on specific interviewee arguments. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. Transcripts were checked by the research team to ensure that the transcripts were error-free.

Each of these cohorts has a unique and significant role within the Australian society. Although the sample was a sample of convenience, it provided the opportunity to examine leader's perception in different organizational context leading to a more inclusive, and robust research findings. Respondents from diverse industries were chosen for generalization purpose as a focus on a particular industry would have restricted our ability to obtaining a holistic view of a complex phenomenon such as leadership. Furthermore, having respondents from diverse industries allowed us to identify subtle differences among the respondents on same concepts.

Data analysis technique

The Leximancer software version 5.0 was used to analyse the data and complemented with some manual thematic analysis of the contents. An inductive approach was adapted to make sense of data based on the interview of the participants. Data were collected until a saturation point when no new themes emerged from the interviews of the respondents from the different cohorts mentioned above (Baker and Edwards, 2012; Sandelowski, 1995). Data were analysed in a manner that respected and expressed the subjectivity of participants' accounts while embracing the reflexive influence of researchers as the interpreters.

Manual thematic analysis was carried out to complement software analysis. This was especially vital in unpacking the individual respondents' understanding of leadership based on their lived experience in crisis as manual thematic analysis allows for gaining insights into the external reality as well. Manual thematic analysis is appropriate, flexible and a powerful tool for understanding behaviours experiences, or thoughts across data sets (Kiger and Varpio, 2020). The researcher thus focused on determining the coherence of the data, which enabled an understanding of the concept of crisis leadership.

The Leximancer software carries out content analysis by going beyond keyword searching but also discovering and extracting thesaurus-based concepts from the data (Smith and Humphreys, 2006). Leximancer allows researchers to:

Literally see the conceptual connections from the perspective of both broad themes, the concepts with which these are composed and their relative proximity and conceptual structure. Interpretations can be verified by the functionality that allows you to interrogate the output at the level of the generating texts for the context, tone and semantic characteristics (Gurney, 2021, p. 7).

It allows the generation of the rationality of themes and concepts through their presence in the data, co-occurrence, and recurring proximity in the text corpus. In other words, themes are identifiable depending on how they appear together directly and indirectly (Smith and Humphreys, 2006). Responses were also grouped into cohorts (i.e. politics, higher education, not-for-profit, and corporate sector) to see if responses between these cohorts vary. The initial Leximancer concept map was set at a theme size of 57% and the concept size was 100%.

Several strategies were adopted to enhance the rigour of the study. Credibility was promoted through deep engagement and allowing sufficient time for interviewees to share examples and anecdotes. Peer debriefing was also used as a validation strategy (Creswell, 2014). Interviews were recorded and transcribed digitally, and transcripts were reviewed by the research team to ensure accuracy of interpretation. A colleague who is an expert in qualitative research and use Leximancer software and who is not involved in the research project was made to review a data sample and review the suitability of the study's coding and interpretations.

Results and findings

Leadership themes and concepts

The findings of this research exposed the difficulty in defining leadership in crisis while identifying key themes and concepts associated with leadership in crisis such as COVID-19 pandemic. Participants acknowledged that "Leadership is part of life" (Corp 4) but also emphasized that "leadership is something very intangible and a very difficult role" (Pol 4). It is further argued that:

The term leadership is much overused. In other words, we keep exerting people to show leadership. We never put any great specificity on what we mean by leadership (HES 3).

Based on the interview of 48 participants from Australian politics, the HES, not-for-profit and corporate sectors, key themes associated with defining effective leadership during crisis appeared to be people, leadership, power, management and organization with varying relevance to different cohorts. While Figure 1 shows the initial Leximancer concept map on leadership showing interconnectedness of the themes mentioned above, Figure 2 showed the relative importance of the themes showing the number of text blocks in this project.

The relative emphasis on different concepts and their association with themes identified through the lexical analysis are shown in Table 1 below.

People

"People" was the most prominent theme that appeared while examining the responses of participants of this study on what leadership is (Figure 2 above). It appeared 508 times in this research and is related to concepts such as leaders, leadership, power, position, community, management, vision, direction, decisions, change and needs (see Table 1). Figure 3 below shows the visual overview of the relationship between people and the concepts mentioned above.

Themes Concepts	People		Leadership		Organization		Power		Management	
	Count	Likelihood (%)	Count	Likelihood (%)	Count	Likelihood (%)	Count	Likelihood (%)	Count	Likelihood (%)
People	-	-	86	30	25	9	36	13	12	4
Leader	42	44	27	28	11	11	15	16	4	4
Need	32	42	25	33	10	13	1	1	4	5
Change	16	47	12	35	4	12	7	21	-	-
Decisions	18	53	9	26	5	15	7	21	-	-
Leadership	86	32	-	-	24	9	29	11	16	6
Time	20	31	17	27	9	14	6	9	1	2
Role	14	41	14	41	2	6	6	18	-	-
Understanding	10	42	11	46	3	13	1	6	1	4
Organization	25	43	24	41	-	-	5	9	8	14
Work	25	41	16	26	11	18	4	7	-	-
Direction	19	53	14	39	3	8	4	11	3	8
Lead	15	48	7	23	2	6	2	6	1	3
Vision	18	64	16	57	4	14	4	14	1	4
Power	36	32	29	26	5	5	-	-	-	-
Community	20	40	20	40	2	4	9	18	1	2
Position	13	36	11	31	3	8	11	31	1	3
Influence	11	35	11	35	-	-	15	48	-	-
Political	4	17	8	32	2	8	5	20	-	-
Management	12	43	16	57	8	29	-	-	-	-
Team	8	33	7	29	4	17	-	-	3	13
Government	3	16	7	37	1	5	1	4	1	5
Environment	4	17	12	52	2	9	1	4	-	-

Source: Based on the output from Lexical analysis

Table 1.
Correlation between themes and concepts

Leadership

The word “leadership” itself stood second as an important theme for understanding leadership in crisis. Concepts relevant to the theme (i.e. Leadership) are, people, community, power, authority, role, management, vision, situation, need, position, influence, organization, relationship, purpose, role, direction, environment and team (see Table 1). For example, 30% of the time “people” is mentioned when “leadership” is mentioned; 39% of the time “power” is mentioned when “leadership” is mentioned. Figure 4 below is the Leximancer concept map showing concepts associated with the theme “leadership”.

While reflecting on leadership the participants of this study emphasized upon about having a clear objective, listening, influencing, motivating and inspiring. They also talked about having the courage and clear principles to achieve the results needed for the

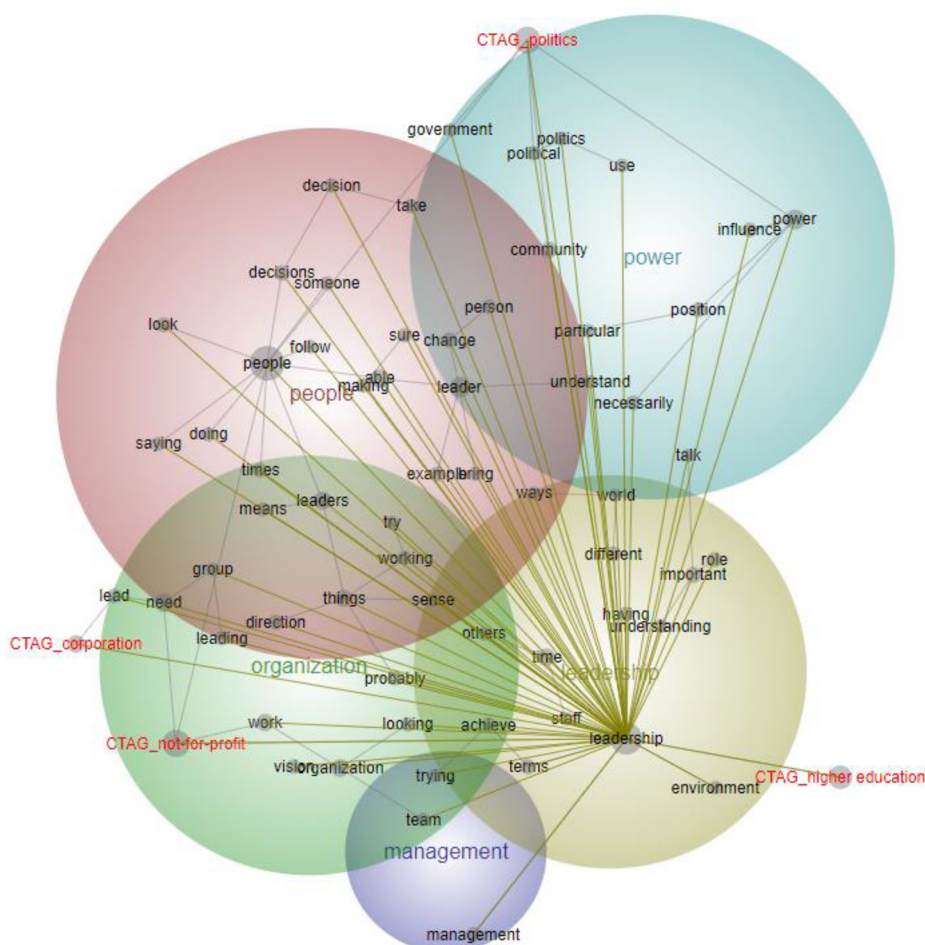


Figure 4. Leximancer concept map showing concepts associated with the theme “leadership”

Source: Based on the output from Lexical analysis

the importance of power, the authority vested upon a leader by the position itself (formal or informal), leaders' obligation to the community or the people they lead, the status of power, and whether power is a positive or a negative virtue:

Often, the power comes with your position, and it is referent to your position. If you don't know how to use that properly, then you're not going to be a good leader (HES 6).

Whether that be in a corporation, a bureaucracy or in a political system, somehow, you're designated with a certain degree of power because of your position (Pol 9).

I think that there is a relationship between power and leadership [. . .] we've got to be careful that power isn't treated as a negative phrase because power is in the sense of you can change or you can direct in a certain way. But power also got to have a positive meaning; we've got to think of it positively because with the power, people then have a trusting relationship and see you as someone they can trust, that is doing the right thing for the country, the organization, and the business (Corp 7).

Organization

Organization appeared as a dormant theme besides dominant themes such as people and leadership. However, respondents clearly indicated the importance of organization while defining leadership. Figure 6 represents the concepts associated with the theme "organization".

Respondents primarily associated organization and people within the organization with leadership (see Table 1) and argued:

Leadership is more about organization; I rely on others to help me achieve what I can to play my part in the organization. And that's the important thing that I view about leadership (Corp 4).

So, when you're employed to head up an organization, the people that employ you, I think are looking for two things; they are looking for leadership, so they are looking for you to lead the organization, but they are also looking for management as well (HES1).

Management

In this study, participants highlighted the importance of management with lesser importance. Figure 7 shows concepts associated with the theme "management".

As shown in Table 1, management is closely related to concepts such as organization, team and direction. Respondents also highlighted the subtle difference between leadership and management although emphasising their association. It is argued:

The definition leadership has twelve points of management or whatever, but I think they are really quite different (HES 1).

I think, in an organizational context, leadership is all about the culture of the organization. And from my experience, you can have the most brilliant management strategies, but if the culture is not in good enough healthy shape, you're not actually going to be able to achieve your management strategy (NFP 6).

Differences between cohorts of respondents

The lexical analysis also enabled identifying concepts highlighted by different cohorts of respondents (i.e. Australian politicians, leaders in the Australian HES, not-for-profit and corporate sectors). While defining leadership, these leaders mentioned common concepts belonging to different themes but with differing emphasis on each of those. Table 2 below shows the relative emphasis on different concepts by different cohorts by showing co-count and likelihood of each concept against the themes.

Table 2.
Count and
likelihoods of
different concepts
based on responses
from different
cohorts

Context Concepts	Politics		Higher education		Not-for Profit		Corporation	
	Count	Likelihood (%)	Count	Likelihood (%)	Count	Likelihood (%)	Count	Likelihood (%)
People	108	39	73	25	80	28	27	9
Leader	37	39	18	19	–	–	13	14
Community	29	58	2	4	17	34	2	4
Need	14	21	12	18	30	45	11	16
Change	11	32	4	12	14	41	5	15
Decisions	11	32	6	18	16	47	1	3
Leadership	64	24	78	29	93	35	34	13
Time	18	28	18	28	26	41	2	3
Role	5	15	15	44	13	38	1	3
Understanding	6	25	10	42	6	25	2	8
Organization	2	3	17	29	28	48	11	19
Work	11	18	11	18	31	51	–	–
Direction	8	22	11	31	9	25	8	22
Lead	3	10	9	30	11	37	7	23
Vision	3	11	5	18	18	64	2	7
Power	48	43	36	32	20	18	7	6
Position	17	47	9	25	9	25	1	3
Influence	17	55	9	29	5	16	–	–
Political	12	50	–	–	12	50	–	–
Management	–	–	17	61	9	32	2	7
Team	3	13	11	46	8	33	2	8
Government	10	56	1	6	6	33	1	6
Environment	6	26	7	30	9	39	1	4
Journey	1	8	1	8	11	85	–	–

Source: Based on the output from Lexical analysis

Leadership from the perspective of leaders in the Australian higher education

Respondents from the Australian HES centred mostly on the theme of leadership with close association with management, team, people, time, role, power, position and influence (Figure 9).

There are visible differences between the emphasis of leaders in the Australian HES and other sectors. For example, while leaders in the Australian HES placed the maximum emphasis on management, politicians who participated in this study placed no importance on this concept. On the contrary, while politicians and leaders in Australian not-for-profit organizations placed considerable weightage on community, leaders in the Australian HES and corporate sector placed little emphasis on this concept. A leader in the Australian HES in response to the question of what leadership is responded:

The way I'll define leadership is, leading an organization with a clear strategy on where the organization is going to be heading. Clear communication on where the vision is, what is the vision of the organization and helping people or leading people and providing guidance so that the vision and the strategy is implemented effectively (HES 9).

Leadership from the perspective of leaders in the Australian not-for-profit sector

Figure 10 below is a concept map showing concepts highlighted by Australian not-for-profit sector leaders who placed maximum emphasis on people, community, leadership, time, role, organization, vision, management and journey.

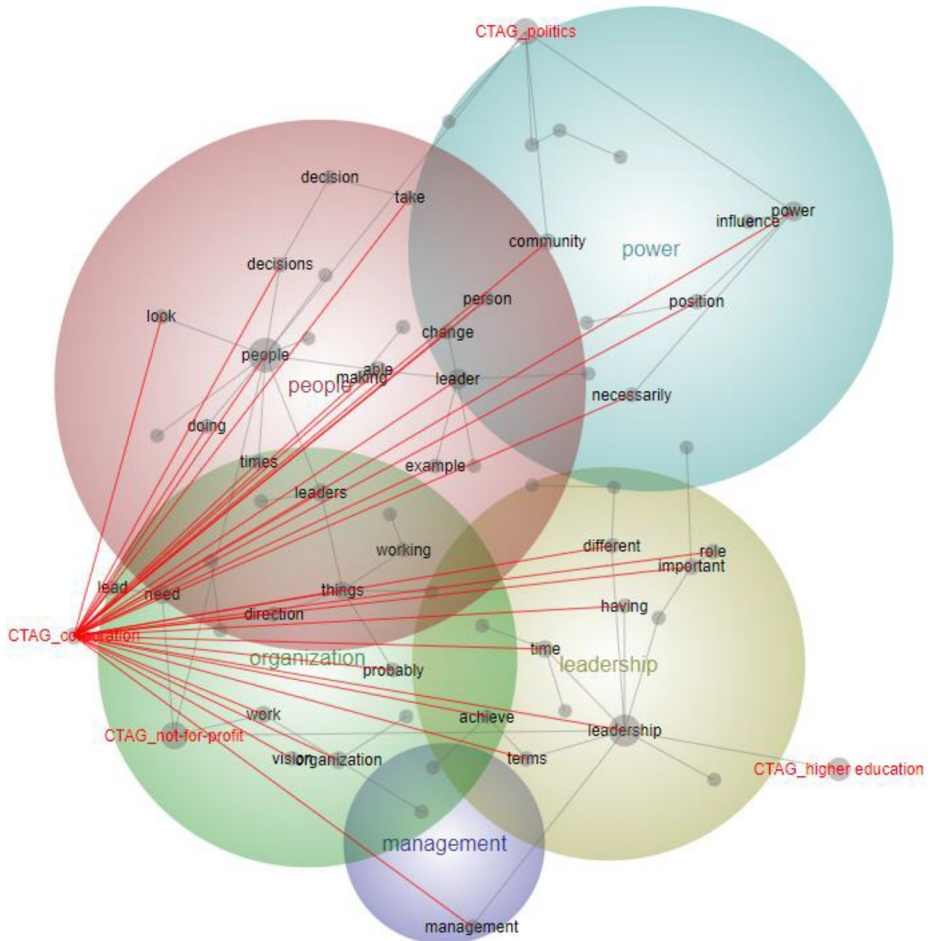


Figure 11. Concept map showing concepts highlighted by Australian corporate sector leaders

Source: Based on the output from Lexical analysis

Discussion and implications

In our study, “leadership” itself appeared as a theme as well as a concept. Consistent with the literature (Stogdill, 1974; Yammarino *et al.*, 2002) respondents in this study expressed the difficulty in defining leadership and argued that “leadership is intangible and is much overused”. The study revealed a shift from leading with a leader’s own charisma to a more humanistic approach. The themes associated with crisis leadership that emerged from the study included people, leadership, power, organization and management.

Consequently, the participants characterized effective leadership as being about people, as leaders needed followers to become leaders and were often judged by the characteristics of the people they lead. Our findings appear to be consistent with the extant literature, as proposed by *Oc et al.* (2023, pp. 17–18), that:

Leadership is also a dynamic process, and who is leading and who is (or are) following can change rapidly, just as who is influencing and who is being influenced often changes dynamically. Indeed, good leaders should be open to influence from those designated as followers.

Also, consistent with the traditional view of leader-follower or leader-member exchange (Dansereau *et al.*, 1975), our study found people are the key ingredient of leadership. However, when people have the title of “leader” or “boss”, they feel more powerful and responsible for the accomplishment of the task and therefore, shape their behaviours accordingly. Likewise, when people consider themselves as followers, they also conclude that they are less responsible for the success and failure of the task (Tourish, 2013). This distinction between “leader” and “follower” or “led”, overemphasizes the authority of the leaders while diminishing the autonomy of followers.

Traditional leadership literature also looks at leadership as an influencing process for achieving the desired goal (Dansereau *et al.*, 1975; Hunt *et al.*, 2018). According to Baker (2001, p. 5) leadership is “simultaneously a purposive activity and a dialogical relationship”. Yukl (2006, p. 3) argued that leadership is “a process whereby intentional influence is exerted by one person over other people”. Northouse (2018) focuses on a few things; (1) leadership is an influencing process (2) it is about influencing others and (3) achievement of goals. The findings of this research as discussed in the earlier section are consistent with the above arguments.

Leadership is closely related to power (Tourish, 2013), which was also evident in this study. Consistent with the extant literature participants of this study argued people, position, influence, and power are intertwined with each other (Burns, 1978; See *et al.*, 2011; Whetten and Cameron, 2011; Quinn *et al.*, 2015). By nature, people are highly sensitive to the presence or absence of power, and it shapes their behaviour accordingly. In fact, McClelland (1965) proposed that people are motivated by their need for achievement, power, and affiliation. Consistent with the leadership literature participants in this study emphasized upon power and legitimacy and on the ability to influence and pursue and be connected to people who do have real power (Burns, 1978; See *et al.*, 2011; Whetten and Cameron, 2011). Infact, “Power has strong effects on those who possess it” (see *et al.*, 2011; p. 27). Power is a necessary precondition for influence and leaders must be able to transform power into influence through their expertise and knowledge and by winning the consent of the employees (Whetten and Cameron, 2011; Quinn *et al.*, 2015). The study also found in this study that only positions do not give power rather support from the people who are being led is the actual source of power to influence and to achieve an objective.

The study showed that leadership and management are different although they are closely associated and sometimes used interchangeably (Sharrock, 2012). However, this study supported Mintzberg (1973) who argued that leadership is one of many roles that managers perform. Management as an executive function supports the notion of top-down communication (Barnard, 1938) while Follett (1941) conceptualized a bottom-up approach suggesting management as a function or a toolbox to fix problems. Follett (1941) further argued that employees may also manipulate employers the same way employers manipulate them.

Despite having comparatively lesser importance, organization appeared as a key theme in this study on leadership. Leaders require an organization in which the followers respond to their leadership. According to structural theory, a leader occupies an important position in the institutional structure which gives him or her the legitimacy to use that position to influence others within that structure (Ahlquist and Levi, 2006). Hogan and Kaiser (2005, p. 171) argued that “leadership is usually defined in terms of people who are in charge of organizations and their units; by definition such people are leaders”. Furthermore, the

relationship between leader and followers is asymmetric. A leader enjoys loyalty, obedience, and attention by virtue of their position and the power to influence others and to coordinates the actions. On the other side people turn to leaders for direction.

Context is obviously a significant factor that needs to be taken into consideration to ascertain leadership effectiveness as context is seen as a moderating variable for conceptualizing leadership theories (Morrell and Hartley, 2006). People are organized in different organizations with different values, purpose and societal concern which affects the leadership dynamics within that organization.

Practical implications

The outcomes from our study add value to management research and practice relevant to the specific Australian sectors (i.e. politics, higher education, not-for-profit and corporate sectors) in several ways. Our study indicated some differences in how employees in the various sectors perceived effective leadership during a crisis. Therefore, our study provides a great basis for practitioners in specific Australian sectors (i.e. politics, higher education, not-for-profit and corporate sectors) to craft policies that promote effective leader behaviours and enhance individual and group success within their organizations during times of crisis. Additionally, organizations could provide targeted leader development programs to enhance leadership effectiveness appropriate for their sectoral contexts and needs of their employees. For example, leadership development programs in specific organizations in the various sectors may opt to develop those specific facets of effective leadership shown to be associated with the improvement of employees' attitudes and behaviors. Practically, the findings of the current study could be used to design appropriate leadership training programmes that are industry specific. Through understanding how effective leaders motivate their followers during a crisis, managers may enhance those attributes associated with leadership effectiveness and thus increase performance outcomes among followers.

Theoretical implications

Theoretically, the current study extended recent research on crisis leadership, by examining the conceptualizations of crisis leadership within specific Australian sectors (i.e. politics, higher education, not-for-profit and corporate sectors). By identifying key themes and concepts associated with leadership in crisis our research also enhanced our understanding on the context of leadership in crisis. This enhances our understanding of the sectoral commonalities and differences in the conceptualizations of effective leadership during a crisis during the COVID19 pandemic. Using data from various sectors, the study affirms the conceptualization of effective leadership as one which takes cognisance of contextual variables when theorizing about effective forms of leadership. This will also facilitate development of a crisis leadership theory and a valid measurement for measuring leader effectiveness during crisis.

Conclusion, limitation and future research

Leadership is a complex phenomenon and leadership literature is constantly growing with new ideas on leadership evolving and theories are being proposed building upon old theories. To lead effectively, leaders have to content with contexts such a crisis, and this context will remain a significant factor that requires appropriate consideration to ascertain leadership effectiveness. Leadership is crucial in crisis as effective leadership is essential in determining strategies, developing policies and procedures within an organization, especially during crisis. This research contributed to the knowledge by identifying themes and concepts and themes (e.g. people, leadership, power, organization and management)

related to crisis leadership based on the lived experience of leaders from diverse organizational settings such as Australian politics, HES, not-for-profit and corporate sectors during crisis such as COVID 19 pandemic. Theoretically our study extended recent research on crisis leadership, by examining the conceptualizations of leadership within specific sectors. It also identified similarities and differences between the views of leaders from diverse organizational context, i.e. politics, HES, not-for-profit and corporations that reinforces the fact that context is an important aspect while theorizing leadership effectiveness in diverse organizational setting.

The current qualitative research is based on thematic analysis of the lived experience of 48 leaders in different organizational context during a crisis. In qualitative research consider reality as psychologically and socially constructed, while the quantitative approach views that social and psychological phenomena have an objective reality. In a quantitative approach the relationships between the phenomena are analysed in terms of causal effects, which allows generalization and prediction. A disadvantage of qualitative research methodology is qualitative research aims to provide rich or thick descriptive accounts of a phenomenon under investigation (Gelo *et al.*, 2008) and the findings of the research are not tested to explore whether the findings are statistically significant or otherwise (Atieno, 2009). Therefore, the findings of this research should also be examined among a wider population through a quantitative survey, which would add value to the validity and reliability of the findings of this research.

Our study provides a great basis for practitioners in specific Australian sectors (i.e. politics, higher education, not-for-profit and corporate sectors) to craft policies that promote effective leader behaviours and enhance individual and group success within their organizations during times of crisis. Findings in this research may facilitate organizations to design targeted leader development programs for enhancing leadership effectiveness among their employees.

While this research only identified key themes and concepts of crisis leadership, to have a deeper understanding of crisis leadership, it is important to identify the attributes of leadership in crisis and clearly develop a theory on crisis leadership with a valid and reliable measurement to measure leadership effectiveness in diverse organizational setting under crisis. As the nature of crisis may vary, further research may also explore the nature crisis that may also add value to the existing literature on crisis leadership.

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