Leading in a Crisis

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Introduction

Having the leadership capacity to handle discomfort is necessary for tackling adaptive challenges in a crisis because adaptive leadership is fundamental to working through uncertainty, making good decisions, and developing trusting relationships. Progress occurs when an adaptive leader can collaborate and mobilize individuals to address complex challenges that are not explicit (Nelson & Squires, 2017). However, leaders sometimes implement a quick, comfortable, and easy answer to a problem. This technical solution may temporarily help a situation, although it does not solve the root of the problem, whereas the problem perpetuates and progress is halted. Leaders that develop a capacity of being uncomfortable in a crisis tend to persevere. According to Tsai et al. (2019), to make progress, leaders must handle discomfort, facilitate cooperation within a team, achieve a common goal, and have an adaptable mindset. This essay will highlight lessons learned by recognizing when adaptive leadership, in place of technical solutions, is necessary while making decisions.

Leading in Crisis

When a crisis unfolds, good leaders should allocate resources to pause and frame the problem to ensure there is a collective vision. Understanding a framework for looking at an issue through the four concepts of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA) can help a leader's effectiveness (Baran & Woznyj, 2020). It is clear that one decision impacted the direction of the next decision, where collaboration, consistent analysis, and anticipating the impact helped make future decisions. The capacity of the leader to understand emergent situations in terms of options and implications is critical (Minciu et al., 2020). Guaranteeing buy-in and collaboration throughout a crisis requires leaders to address problems with the least opposition and the greatest chance of success. Another lesson learned of leading in a crisis is

gaining awareness and techniques, such as influencing and minimizing resistance through collaboration. The art of influencing and mobilizing a diverse team are essential aspects of leading through a crisis and being adaptable.

Adaptive Leadership

Being an adaptable leader goes beyond the apparent skill of flexibility and includes decision-making, communication, collaboration, risk-taking, and creating a more significant impact. An adaptive leader knows they cannot do it alone if a systems change is evident. Adaptive challenges are issues that experts cannot handle independently; rather, it needs a collective process that must be adaptable and mobilizing (Pianesi, 2019). Quick decision-making may be necessary for today's fast-paced environment, although the decision may not be the long-term solution. Hence, a lesson learned in addressing a crisis is that an adaptive process and leader in a VUCA environment can reduce the tendency for technical solutions and authoritative leadership, which is less effective. Adaptive leadership demands comprehending the larger picture by thinking, reflecting, and evaluating as a crisis unfolds (Macpherson, 2020). A leader should be versed in adaptive processes and have the adaptive leadership capacity to avoid technical solutions.

Avoiding Technical Solutions

Avoiding technical solutions is no easy feat, as external factors pressure leaders to get quick results, whereas looking for easy solutions becomes a fallback. Technical solutions are easy to identify, quick to implement, and involve fewer people in making decisions (Nelson & Squires, 2017). The impact of each decision affects morale of others, where an adaptive leader's intent to reduce resistance and instill resilience is essential. Adaptive leadership qualities include a high level of resilience, the ability to lead through challenging circumstances, and the

willingness to try new things (Baran & Woznyj, 2020). To avoid a technical solution, the leader

must distinguish between a technical solution and an adaptive challenge. An adaptive challenge

does not have an easy answer and is an inclusive decision-making process that utilizes

improvisation, learning, and multiple stakeholders' involvement (Pianesi, 2019). Understanding

appropriate decision-making methods in differing adaptive challenge situations will help a leader

make better decisions.

Decision Making

Deciding in a complex environment requires a process to think calmly, differently, and

collectively. Developing a process that identifies and articulates the adaptive challenge is the first

step to finding the best solution that offers tremendous success. Additionally, the leader's ability

to be inclusive within its stakeholders will increase the success of attaining the goal (see Figure

1). Utilizing and honoring diverse perspectives to solve a problem promotes a sense of belonging

and better outcomes (Dunn, 2020). Decision-making is complex when there is lack of

information, which necessitated improvisation and the pressure to avoid failure. Another learning

experience in avoiding technical solutions is sitting in discomfort and being aware that

discomfort offers new thinking. Adaptive leaders anticipate opportunities to solve a problem,

overcome obstacles, learn from failure, and rely on team members' contributions (Winter, 2019).

However, proactively having multiple decision-making methods allows a leader to adapt to

different situations. Leaders with cognitive flexibility can include numerous thinking processes

into decision-making, can maintain several possible outcomes, and recognize when to adjust and

implement change (CCL, 2021). Embracing discomfort involves a leader having cognitive

flexibility and the ability to have emotional regulation.

Embracing Discomfort

Making difficult decisions in a VUCA environment can be discomforting, causing emotional responses which can impact one's cognitive ability. Instead of looking at making difficult decisions as risk-taking, which can be emotionally crippling, establishing a mindset of curiosity can flip discomfort into empowerment. According to Kaye & Giulioni (2021), curiosity promotes more significant business outcomes, creativity, and workability, leading to healthier relationships. An insight in leading in a crisis is embracing discomfort develops capacity to pause when discomfort arises, not to make an emotionally rash decision based on fear; instead, shift to a curious mindset and explore possible outcomes. Exploring multiple options with stakeholders about the fear of ramifications of a decision promotes psychological safety through healthy debate (D'Auria & De Smet, 2020). Moreover, the leaders and stakeholders need to establish psychological safety and trust within teams to have healthy discussions.
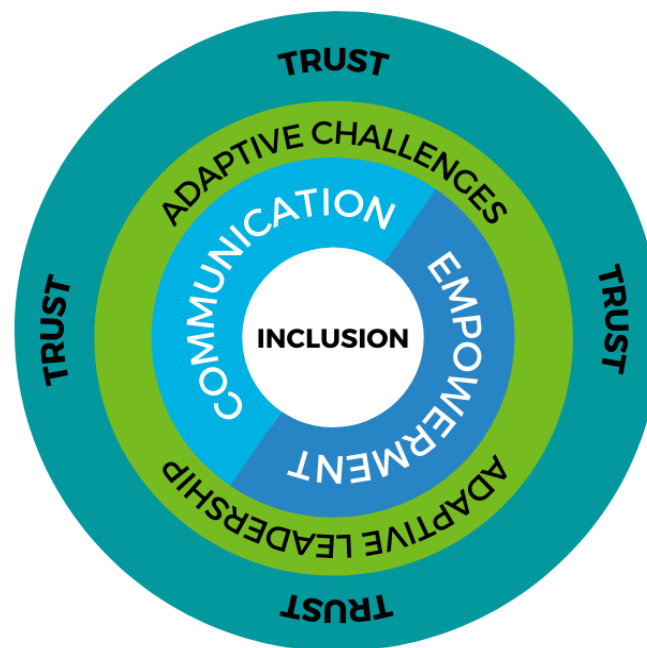
Virtual Teams

In-person teams are becoming the exception to the rule of how individuals work together compared to the new norm of virtual teams. Teams, more and more, are meeting virtually to exchange information quickly, provide flexibility to individual team members, and can create efficiencies and better results in a global marketplace (Zakaria & Mohd Yusof, 2020). However, virtual meeting platforms do have a downside. In contrast, team members can lose aspects of communication such as body language, tone, and interpersonal connections, especially when working with different cultural backgrounds, resulting in conflict, lack of trust, and inclusion. As shown in Figure 1, leaders can decrease conflict in teams and increase effectiveness by promoting collaboration, communication, and trust with people of diverse cultures and beliefs (Lauring & Jonasson, 2018). A lesson learned is when a virtual team has adaptive leadership

skills in addressing an adaptive challenge, and when empowerment exists, the team has less fear, conflict, and more inclusivity. Another benefit of working within a virtual network of teams is that it can solve adaptive problems speedily in challenging and chaotic circumstances (D'Auria & De Smet, 2020). Ensuring effective communication through mediated communication (MC) techniques is another important factor in crisis leadership.

Figure 1

Components of Effective Global Virtual Team

EFFECTIVE GLOBAL VIRTUAL TEAM

Note. Ensuring a virtual team trusts each other, can work through an adaptive challenge utilizing adaptive leadership, has good communication skills, and is empowered to attain a goal, results in inclusivity producing quality solutions.

Mediated Communication

Another trend in virtual teams is the use of MC and how individuals interpret the information being shared electronically versus being face-to-face. MC is when there is the use of

technology to transfer information through digital forms such as social media platforms, teleconferencing, instant messaging, email, texting, and collaboration programs (Savu, 2019). The differences in individual interpretation of the information and emotions may be lost in translation and challenging when using MC. According to Linder & O'Brien (2019), the challenge of using MC in global virtual teams is the complexity of technology, the geography of team members, cultural differences, goal interpretation, and biases. Ensuring there is no hidden agenda, communication is transparent and interpreted with the intended meaning, will help a team make quality decisions and avoid misinterpretations. Another insight gained to address the adaptive challenge is interpreting the intent and a message to ensure it is trustworthy, rational, and relevant information.

Trust

Without trust in a team, there is low engagement, low performance, and minimal progress towards a goal. Team members that are dependable, devoted, and display competencies to accomplish a task inspire trust, leading to leadership distribution (Linder & O'Brien, 2019). Adaptive leaders recognize that distributive leadership helps a team's performance and extends trust. According to Macpherson (2020), if a leader is self-serving and authoritative, they can be perceived as untrustworthy, which reduces confidence, create derailment, and institutions will likely suffer. During a crisis, decisions that did not utilize an adaptive approach and distributive leadership outcomes are likely to result in low morale and a lack of trust. Ensuring a culture of trust exists will support institutions to be better apt at listening to all stakeholders' positions to attain buy-in, learn from mistakes, and know when to pivot (Tsai et al., 2019). Therefore, through trust, a team will express discomfort, feel empowered, communicate effectively, remove barriers collectively, and be engaged to attain a successful outcome.

Empowerment

The feeling of empowerment correlates to one's ability to be resilient in the presence of discomfort when making difficult decisions. The capacity of leaders to be flexible during a crisis can improve one's resilience and adaptability. Ensuring good decisions during a crisis, leaders' attention to individuals' feeling of empowerment is crucial to advancement, resilience, and an optimistic outlook (D'Auria & De Smets, 2020). Empowerment is another leadership component that provides motivation for effective virtual teams to muddle through difficult situations optimistically (see Figure 1). Adaptive leaders that empower stakeholders in uncertainty provide hope, inspiration, and promote knowledge sharing (Dunn, 2020). Crisis can elevate the feeling of overwhelm, anxiety, hopelessness, and languishing causing individuals to cope less effectively and think irrationally. The last lesson learned in navigating a crisis is to keep an optimistic outlook which helps to feel empowered. Adaptive leaders that look to the future using distributive leadership, acting in a way that leverages positive thinking and creativity rather than focusing on difficulties, aid in increasing team effectiveness (Ali et al., 2020). Empowerment allows for better cooperation, ideas, and optimal solutions.

Conclusion

In conclusion, multiple lessons were learned while leading through a crisis relating to adaptive challenges versus technical solutions. First, an adaptive leader's capacity to analyze each event and have a shared goal avoids technical solutions. Second, influencing can minimize resistance and create greater buy-in. Additionally, addressing a crisis utilizing the framework and understanding the concepts of VUCA can reduce the tendency for technical solutions and authoritative leadership. With a shift in working remotely in virtual teams that use MC, interpreting the intent and message of stakeholders to build trust and credibility is vital to an

inclusive team. Effective global teams have high trust, good communication, inclusion, feel empowered, and are adaptive leaders. The final lesson was practicing optimism which helps to feel empowered.

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