

Influence of Covid'19 on Corporate Leadership Behavior towards Workforce Safety and Business Objectives

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Abstract

The overview of the study is to understand leadership behavior in handling pandemic and its reaction towards workforce and in dealing with business objectives. Corporate leadership behavior in handling catastrophe is an exceptional task. Literatures have been discussed on various theories and styles of leadership that suit different circumstances based on the operational environment. The primary data was collected from Founders, CxO and Executive Leadership in the corporate sector to ascertain the behavior of leader's under different variable clusters which embark employee safety, financial/economic decisions and business objectives. The study revealed the corporate leadership has countered positively in handling their workforce and business during pandemic-COVID19.

Keywords: Leadership, Behavior, Workforce, Pandemic, COVID19, Catastrophe, Employee Safety

Introduction

September 11, 2001 terror attacks drew global attention, for, the fatal attack was particularly damaging multi-fold and the aftermath of it impacted the U.S as a whole. While help and concentration flowed towards aid and victims, about 462 extended masses were layoffs because of the attacks that displaced around 130,000 employees. The unemployment rate inclined to a total of 5.0% which is significant. The attacks caused an estimated overall economic loss to the city of \$82.8-\$94.8 billion USD.

The Great Recession in 2009 was another global economic downturn that devastated world financial markets as well as the banking and real estate industries. In the steep annual drop in jobs, i.e. 9 million globally, marked the highest yearly job-loss total since 1945, the year in which World War II ended. Most industrialized countries experienced economic slowdowns of varying severity but few notable exceptions were China, India, and Indonesia. Many argue it is leadership's responsibility to handle crisis, especially in the public sector, with potentially debilitating social and economic effects across the board from welfare to education to security to the environment (CF Boin and Hart 2003; Boin, 2005). Also, organizations and leadership

are pursued to change ways in business arrangements, rules getting realigned, standard operating procedures and relationships with key stakeholders. Leadership is in a fix to do more with less and of course, we now have COVID-19 creating a tumultuous atmosphere globally calling for rapid measures of adaptation by both the governments as well as the corporates, hand-in-hand.

Handling unprecedented circumstances and complex situations are by-products of leadership in an organization. Coronavirus-Pandemic-COVID 19 has brought the entire human race to ascertain the nature of 'leadership behavior' at every level one can encounter. It is imperative that leadership and its role have a central part to play in handling the pandemic. Leadership behavior and attitude has been put to test in many scenarios, like social, economical, emotional, physical, mental and psychological front.

For business leadership, managing the workforce and setting the expectation with the employees at these unusual times like pandemic-COVID19 can be a strenuous task. It is like never before that the entire human race has been pushed to stay put within four walls with an indefinite timeline of the lockdown mostly across the globe. This pandemic circumstance has pressed all sectors around the world to reorganize business operations accordingly. In another perspective, one could also say this has brought about space for creativity to provide solutions to complex problems in a much simplified manner.

Should we be surprised at how IT sectors have managed to move their entire business operations to remote in no time? A study (conducted by Granter 2020) indicates that India ranks on top with an overall 67% of its IT workforce working well equipped in managing business using tools like artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning (ML) followed by USA and UK in second and third place. While business analysts, stock market experts and economists were discussing the 'doomsday' Corona Virus has brought us to, China, which is the epicenter of COVID19 outbreak embraced nanotechnology and IOT (internet of things) for new product introduction (NPI) in their manufacturing units. With the usage of IOT and nanotech one can access even the minuscule detail of an assembly line in a remote Chinese factory, while 'working from home' in any part of the world.

Leadership behavior involves handling each of a given situation and matures itself over a period of time. We have seen many such leadership examples, both in public life as well as business corporations. The role of a leadership is sought after especially for guidance and to understand better handling of a challenging situation. The effects of understanding organization culture, commitment of the

organization, leadership behavior and overall business performance are elements that go together and have an equal role to play. These facets boom job satisfaction of the workforce and also aid to the behavior at helm of affairs.

Changes take place every day in business. Catastrophic times like pandemic-COVID19 are crucial phases during which the leadership behavior of this decade has a lot more reason to be studied and looked at up-close. In this context the current paper aims, 1) To analyze leadership focus towards employee's safety. 2) To check leadership responsibility and foresight to meet business goals. 3) To estimate leadership contribution in motivating employees during challenging times. 4) To understand leadership commitment towards employees salary and bonus.

For the purpose of this study, pandemic-COVID19 will be mentioned from a challenging time perspective and the terms like employees and workforce will be used interchangeably.

Review and Discussion around Literature

According to Yukl (2013), "leadership is the process of influencing others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how it needs to be done, and the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish the shared objectives". The context of employee's safety and wellness are now discussed like never before. The idea of Work from Home (WFH) seems to serve a big leap of benefit to both the employer and employee. While the cost of business operation is getting optimized, it creates more room for the workforce to spend time on things other than regular office tasks. Leadership across industries seems to have a tough road ahead in keeping every stakeholder connected while at the same time keeping the workforce motivated.

Leadership behavior is a well-researched area. There are countless theories that describe leadership behavior under different context, domain and state. The effect and influence that leadership imparts on its organization, performance of the workforce and other associated stakeholders is shaped by "behavior" (Yukl 2012). During the mid and late 90's there was an extensive research conducted around leadership behavior (Fleishman 1953, 1957, 1973) (Blake 1964) (Likert 1961) (House 1971) (Misumi 1985) and also quite a few in the 2000's (Overfield 2010) (Van Wart 2012) (Yukl 2013).

Leadership Behavior has a definite impact on an organization's culture. There are studies that relate leadership behavior with culture (Huey Yiing, L 2009) (Leach 1976). In fact, organization culture defines the very ethos of the workplace. Culture makes the role of the

workforce cater to the role of leadership especially in large corporations. Visibility of culture is the discipline in an organizational context that goes hand-in-hand with leadership behavior (Harrison 1991). But, of course, there are situations in which even a highly cultured environment can drive itself astray, during uncertain circumstances. In the context of a business leader, the onus to behave more responsibly is felt, with increasing cultural diversity in the workforce and with higher expectation to motivate and satisfy the employees (Voegtlin 2012).

'Personal Value' has a direct impact on leadership behavior and vice versa. They get altered with change in culture that the leadership goes through and takes time to show divergence from earlier culture factors. The effect of multifold culture with personal values has certain guidance on the leadership behavior (Chang 2008). It also helps in shaping the decision making part of the leadership.

Employee's wellness is considered supreme priority in the global market. Organizations today have taken more interest in ensuring the well-being of their employees not only under compulsions of the law but also out of self-interest. New age employees are more vocal than ever on many digital social platforms plus they are also directly or indirectly branding the organization positive or negative through word-of-mouth. Taking more care than ever in managing the workforce's well-being becomes more important than ever. The performance of the employees gets amplified based on the well-being that they are covered by their organization. It shifts the employee's focus from worry to work related performance. There are many studies that have shown empirical evidence to the fact employee's well-being is linked with leadership behavior (Graen G 2010, Harris KJ 2009, Arnold KA 2007, Hetland H 2007, Nielsen K 2012, Gregersen 2014).

During extreme calamities and challenging times the world witnessed governments of the day taking measures of providing sufficient direction to various business houses to take adequate actions to safeguard the well-being of the employees. The leadership of the corporate world is taxed with mammoth commitments of dealing with a failing business economy and at the same time walking on a tight rope to balance the well-being of their workforce. Leadership that acted swiftly on employee's well-being ensured work performance while retaining customer delight. A positive and safe organization culture is essential with communication, commitment and employee training for the fundamentals of safety leadership across all sectors (Skeppers C.N. 2015).

Change certainly makes a lot of noise around the system and in an organizational behavior context it can mean and

relate to motivational factors and happiness at work. At challenging times, employee motivation can be tested due to the changes in business chores and its related effects are indeed felt in the day to day work life. The role of inspirational leadership has influence over the happiness of employees at work (Vallina 2018). The role of transformational leadership style has seen significant positive impact on the work behavior and morale of the employees (BM Bass 1999). The motivation factor and turning employees towards innovative work is felt higher under a transformational leadership style than under laissez-faire leadership style (Gemedra, 2020).

With business growing multi fold and expanding geographically the task of inspiring employees and keeping them aligned to achieve business goals could get challenging. Leadership believes the workforce come in close contact with each other through either socializing or personal contact; however with teams getting widely spread and working remotely in geographies, the emphasis is on inspirational leadership (Joshi 2009). In recent times organizations have become more complex with business diversity and wider client base. The organizations' complex situation has compelled itself to adapt to dynamic leadership strategies. With an institutionalized environment, new methods of reorganizing work without obstructing the change behavior at micro and macro level of the organization is critical for the leadership to establish. Patterns of successful leadership behavior in an organization can be made common that could also transcend based on contingency factors (Larsson 2010).

Emotional intelligence is another quality that is paramount in leadership behavior. It is the ability to understand the situation around the business system and take measures wisely in human sense which also covers the employer attitude towards employees. In a dynamic business ecosystem the role of emotional intelligence is like a catalyst for better management and inspirational leadership (Chopra 2010). Leadership is not only about empathy towards the diverse workforce during difficult times but also, it has been critically viewed as it drives significant value in an organizational context (Businessolver 2019). Leadership finds itself in a difficult spot when it has to steer with no given clarity or lack of fixed points of direction. So, it shows leaning toward making own-rules under such unstable times (Weick 1993). While this may be true, virtuousness can be a simple way for leadership to steer during times of change and uncertainty (Peterson and Seligman 2004).

Leadership in crisis handling is highlighted especially when the crisis is largely distinctive. The leadership behavior is looked up close unlike under normal

circumstances. Crisis leadership revolves around managing information, stakeholders, planning organization and spring back order in business (DuBrin 2013). Swiftiness in responding to crisis is a pragmatic approach and is an admired behavior in a leader. A lot of crises can be averted with effective communication and management. The behavior of a leader around the frequency of communication with all stakeholders in an organization will support in mitigating the damages arising from crisis (Gilstrap 2015).

Leadership provides inspiration at work. The organization staff, be it the frontline executives or board room managers, are charged and decked-up to unleash their skills subject to the behavior of a leader. The performance in delivery to client expectation and matching the needs of a customer is complimented only with effectiveness of leadership behavior. There are external factors that drive delivery of business fulfillments and a substantial part of it comes with the standard of leadership behavior (Hui 2010). Leadership behavior is assessed even during non-verbal circumstances. Leadership that is non-verbal is a critical area. Emotions which are not essentially communicated verbally are expressed using non-verbal methods and they have their implications over the leadership behavior (Sullivan, D. G. 1993).

Charismatic nature in leadership is yet another critical quality that denotes behavior aspects by the organizational workforce. Charisma is difficult to manifest but being so is not too vital to be an effective leader (Cutler 2010). Leadership behavior carries the weight of responsibility. There are different debates around this area, leadership cannot oblige all stakeholders, and there could be fractions that might feel the leadership has not acted responsibly. Satisfying all sections of the organizations is an undesirable task for the leadership. It is practically less possible to have everyone on board to agree. Disagreements and disputes are bound to surface; the leadership carefully caters to the situation and the quality of responsibility shown in the behavior will inevitably reflect. Multiple stakeholder priorities have to be addressed by the responsible leadership while carefully managing globalization and macro-level forces in an organization (Maak T 2006, Waldman 2008).

Fostering trust among the workforce and reinforcing faith during challenging times firmly establishes the crucial role played by leadership behavior and its decision making ability. Mismanagement in an organization can never really be attributed to a single leader. Leadership at multiple levels works in the behavior aspect. At different levels of hierarchies senior leaders influence the behavior of the leaders who they oversee and in turn it reflects on the

behavior of the team and employees and the organization as a whole (Searle and Barbuto 2013). Authentic leadership builds values of discipline, legitimacy and honesty that can reinforce the faith of the followers in a given system (Hirst 2016).

The qualities of a leadership behavior (House and Mitchell 1974) such as directive, supportive, participative and achievement have a necessity to be analyzed in organizational context. Supportive leadership and Participative leadership were similar to the behavior known as "consideration", while the Directive leadership and Achievement-oriented leadership styles were similar to the behavior known as "initiating structure". The past literature discusses routes, evolution and progress of leadership behavior under different styles and aspects. However, studying the leadership behavior during a pandemic that has not been witnessed in the last hundred years is altogether a new dimension for research. The study is aimed to estimate corporate leadership response from the perspective of COVID 19 in three factors 1) Employee safety 2) Employee motivation & 3) Achieving business goals/objectives.

Research Methodology

Sample and Questionnaire:

The study is based on primary data collection. Non-probability judgment sampling was used to define the sample. Questionnaire was shared with a cross section of CxO level leaders, Founders, Presidents and other senior leadership from multinational corporations, listed companies, and fortune 500 companies. It was a deliberate choice not to approach leaders of the same industry section to ensure that the cross section of data collection is more effective. On an average, 9-10% response is aimed for data gathering under each industrial group to ensure equal participation. In total 619 respondents were approached, of which 247 responded. After removing incomplete responses a total of 207 responses were taken for the study.

A semi structured questionnaire was formulated after studying Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) and Work Values Questionnaire (WVQ). The questionnaire was divided into three sections 1) Leadership responsibility towards employee's health and financial/economic safety, 2) Leadership facilitating motivation aspects to employees, and 3) Leadership enabling business focus and optimism. The questionnaire was reviewed by two senior academician and behavioral study experts. Given the extremely busy schedule of executive leadership a simple questionnaire with closed choice was used to capture the response.

Hypothesis:

H0- During COVID19 the leadership is not providing adequate care towards workforce

H1- During COVID19 the leadership is providing adequate care towards workforce

Tools employed for data analysis:

Percentage of response gathered is used to draw inference and conclusion of the test.

Limitation and Scope

The study is limited to understanding corporate leadership behavior and commitment ability during pandemic-COVID19 i.e. during challenging business times and it

does not cover leadership in public sector entities. The study covers corporate establishments and not SMEs.

The study can be future extended to understand wider gender behavior at leadership level during challenging business times. A focused study on behavior of first generation entrepreneurial leaders or women self-help groups during challenging times can be researched.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

This investigation was based on the data gathered from 207 leaders at Executive leadership and CxO level and their direct reporting leadership. The demographic classification of the respondents is below:

Table 1. Demographic Classification

Demography	Responses	In %
Gender		
Female	27	13%
Male	180	87%
Total	208	100%
Organization Size		
Below 10,000	110	53%
Above 10,000	97	47%
Total	207	100%
Region		
Central & South East Asia	101	49%
Europe & UK	35	17%
US & Canada	44	21%
Middle East	27	13%
Total	207	100%
Designation		
CxO	53	26%
President, Chairman, Executive leadership	23	11%
Founder, Co-founder	21	10%
BU Head, Director, Vice President, Sr. Vice President	110	53%
Total	207	100%

Table 2. Industry wise responses

Industry	Count	In %
Auto & Manufacturing	20	10%
Aviation and Aerospace	10	5%
BFSI (Banking, Financial and Insurance)	25	12%
Construction Industry	20	10%
Consulting & Data Analytics	12	6%
Ecommerce	15	7%
FMCG (Fast moving consumer goods)	23	11%
Healthcare & Pharmaceuticals	22	11%
Information technology	28	14%
Large and Tele-Communication	10	5%
Lifestyle	22	11%
Grand Total	207	100%

Data has been collected across a number of industry verticals. On an average, 9-10% of response has been gathered under each industry type to ensure right mix and balance.

Table 3. Variable cluster *

Factors	Variable Cluster	No	Yes	Total	
Health and Economic Safety of Employees	Employees safety before lockdown	Count	7	200	207
		% within cluster	3%	97%	100%
	Life insurance enchantment	Count	145	62	207
		% within cluster	70%	30%	100%
	Allowing work from home before govt. advise	Count	42	165	207
		% within cluster	20%	80%	100%
	Salary cut at leadership level to benefit employees	Count	89	118	207
		% within cluster	43%	57%	100%
	Bonus & Incentive cut throughout organization	Count	110	97	207
		% within cluster	53%	47%	100%
Motivation aspects of Employees	Speaking to the employees directly	Count	10	197	207
		% within cluster	5%	95%	100%
	Dip in employee motivation	Count	175	32	207
		% within cluster	85%	15%	100%
	Encouraging creativity and idea generation	Count	17	190	207
		% within cluster	8%	92%	100%
	Adding more work to employees	Count	167	40	207
		% within cluster	81%	19%	100%
	Direct client management by leadership	Count	108	99	207
		% within cluster	52%	48%	100%
Leadership response to Business Goals	Difficult to revive business	Count	40	167	207
		% within cluster	19%	81%	100%
	Business goals accountability	Count	4	203	207
		% within cluster	2%	98%	100%
	Envisioning opportunities during COVID19	Count	35	172	207
		% within cluster	17%	83%	100%
	Honoring offer of employment already made	Count	15	192	207
		% within cluster	7%	93%	100%
	Assimilation of newly joined employees	Count	36	171	207
		% within cluster	17%	83%	100%

*Based on primary data collected from leadership through survey method

Overall, 97% of leadership had taken adequate measures and sufficient action focusing on safety parameters of their workforce before the lockdown was announced. However 20% of the respondents from the FMCG sector could not pay much time on employee's safety before the lockdown period.

During the pandemic-COVID 19, governments of the day had advised all industries to shut shop, the study conducted analyzed if the government agency had not insisted on industry close down would leadership prefer employees working remotely. For which, 80% of leadership response is that they would not want to compromise the health and safety of their workforce, and prefer their staff working

remotely irrespective of government regulations. In the construction industry 60% respondents felt, but for government mandate they would like to have their employees coming to work despite COVID19 outbreak. This was followed by 50% of respondents from E-commerce platforms, which prefers the same.

On the aspect of understanding the futuristic thinking behavior of leadership, for questions regarding employees 'life insurance cover' during the pandemic, an overall 70% of respondents did not enhance the benefit despite World Health Organization declaring COVID 19 as pandemic (during early March, 2020). Interestingly, 56% of respondents from the Healthcare and Pharmaceutical industry have already taken measures to upgrade 'life cover'. It is necessary to point out that the questionnaire did not dwell into health/medical insurance benefits given that most governments have already announced cover for treatment of coronavirus. 44% of women leadership has responded positively to enhancing 'insurance life cover' to the staff due to pandemic-COVID-19.

On the questions of leadership taking 'salary-cut', 57% of the leaders in organizations are willing to take a cut to enable the benefit getting passed over to employees. It is to be noted, 67% leadership from Aviation and Aerospace and 66% of leadership from BFSI sectors are not in favor to consider a 'pay cut'.

In case of the organizations whose workforce headcount is less than 10,000, 54% of the leadership is already contemplating on cutting down promotions, bonus, incentives or variable pay for current year. From overall industry stand point, 75% of E-commerce industry leadership and 67% of Aviation and Aerospace industry leadership recommend no promotion, bonus or variable pay for current year.

The study also wanted to check on leadership's immediate plans for candidates already offered with employment or prospective employees. By large, 93% of leadership has not considered the option of revoking or rescinding the offer/letter of employment made to prospective candidates; however, 33% of leadership in Aviation and Aerospace sector had to cancel the offers made to future joiners. 83% of leadership has managed to sensitize the organization culture with newly joined workforce during lockdown.

The study also covered the aspect of leadership reaching out to employees to keep them motivated and engaged, since meeting the organization workforce is now remote.

95% of leadership had direct contact and connection with their employees during the pandemic. Significantly, 85% of leadership does not think their employees motivation

level has dropped given business operations have moved to remote. However, 50% Leadership from the Telecommunication sector and 46% leadership in the Consulting sector already feel their employees' motivation levels have taken a hit. 92% of leadership has encouraged their teams' creative thinking and idea generation using the pandemic-COVID19 situation.

A majority of 81% of leadership cutting across industry feel that the path to revive from business damage caused by pandemic-COVID19 is going to be difficult. Of which, 83% of leaders from organizations with less than 10,000 people feel the severity of business damage is high.

Two industries sounded optimistic, i.e. 50% leaders from E-commerce platforms, followed by 33% leadership from Healthcare & Pharmaceuticals, feel the path to revival may not be that difficult. Overall, 83% of male leaders sound confident to revive business compared to 69% of the women counterparts.

83% of leadership envisions business opportunities while others talk about problems caused by COVID-19. 98% leadership has shown a sense of ownership and accountability to achieve business goals and organization objectives.

During the lockdown, 52% of leadership did not get a chance directly in handling clients and customer concern. Whereas 80% leadership from FMCG sector, followed by 75% leadership from Telecommunication sector, and 63% of IT leadership had to handle issues faced by the customers and clients directly to ease the burden of their teams.

Achievement of Hypothesis:

H0 - During COVID19 the leadership is not providing adequate care towards workforce

H1 - During COVID19 the leadership is providing adequate care towards workforce

From the above inference summary it is quite clear that there is sufficient evidence to support the claim that: during COVID19 the leadership is providing adequate care towards the workforce. Given that H1 is proven after analyzing primary data and H0 is not proven, hence H0 is rejected.

Conclusion

The study is aimed to understand leadership behavior towards their organization's workforce and business goals. The results exhibit a positive display by leadership behavior. In times like pandemic the leadership is perhaps expected to do more with far less resources availability.

The expectation is high from all stakeholders and the ways like effective communication, being flexible to adapting the situation and operational decision making becomes tricky. The study displays leadership being optimistic towards achieving business goals to ensure there is no derail from the objective of the organization.

Leadership has a crucially positive role to play during challenging times, during paradigm shift and of course, catastrophic situations. While handling unprecedented crisis, leadership is taken by many surprises and behavior displayed cannot be generalized against all challenging times. Leadership requirements are dynamic based on the scope of delivery, environment and velocity of the situation. It is difficult to judge leadership behavior purely based on situations like pandemic, but at the same time, it is quite possible with the help of literature to draw or outline a framework of competencies that is worth inculcating to handle catastrophe.

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