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The Evolution of Leadership During the COVID-19 Pandemic: An Analysis of the Research

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The Evolution of Leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic: an Analysis of the Research

By

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An Undergraduate honors thesis submitted in Partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

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In

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Table Of Contents

Table Of Contents.....	2
Key Words:.....	3
Abstract:.....	3
Introduction:.....	3
Some Background: A Short History of Leadership:.....	5
Leadership outside of Humanity (Since the dawn of Nature).....	5
Band and Tribal Leadership: (From the start of Humanity - Present).....	5
Chiefs, Kings and Warlords (13,000 years ago - 1800 though some are still present).....	6
State and Business Leadership (around 1773).....	7
The Pandemic as an Opportunity to Study and Change Leadership Practices.....	8
Leadership as Co-Creation: Safe Spaces for Motivation and Problem-Solving.....	9
Dealing with the Great Resignation.....	10
Challenge of Greater Inequality.....	10
Intangible Assets.....	11
What's Next for Leadership?.....	12
References:.....	15

Key Words:

Pandemic, Leadership, Business, Evolution, Leading

Abstract:

A crisis, however terrible in its consequences, is also a great opportunity to study and create new models of leadership, to discover how the concept of leadership has evolved over the pandemic. Hence this paper's research question, "How has the COVID-19 pandemic changed the concept and practice of leadership? In the end much of the empirical evidence for what COVID 19 did or didn't change in leadership practices is still relatively ambiguous. So it is too early to say that "business as usual" is gone for good. And COVID furthered and deepened long term trends, accelerating the great resignation and a dramatic revaluation of intangible assets like reputation, intellectual property and human capital. In response, there is a clear need for a new leadership mindset for the 21st century after the Covid pandemic.

Introduction:

A crisis, however terrible in its consequences, is also a great opportunity to study and create new models of leadership — in that respect COVID-19 was one of the biggest "opportunities" in human history.

The concept of leadership is one of the world's oldest obsessions, rivaling in age the very emergence of civilization. "The act or an instance of leading," as defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary, means "providing direction or guidance" (Webster). Nelson Mandela, who led his country out of the darkness of Apartheid, compares a leader to a shepherd. "He stays behind the flock, letting the most nimble go out ahead, whereupon the others follow, not realizing that all along they are being directed from behind" (Kruse, 2022).

There is a vast academic literature on leadership. However, according to an article by William C, H, Prentice (2004), most research overlooks its "essence."

Attempts to analyze leadership tend to fail because the would-be analyst misconceives his task. He usually does not study leadership at all. Instead he studies popularity, power, showmanship, or wisdom in long-range planning. Some leaders have these things, but they are not of the essence of leadership.

Leadership is the accomplishment of a goal through the direction of human assistants. The man who successfully marshals his human collaborators to achieve particular ends is a leader. A great leader is one who can do so day after day, and year after year, in a wide variety of circumstances" (Prentice, 2004).

The idea of leadership has been conceptualized since before Biblical times. The actual term has been in existence since the 1700s, while the word “leader” has been in use since at least the 1300s. Over the last 75 years, "leadership" has been defined in literally hundreds of different ways by leaders themselves and people writing about them. What is then the true meaning of leadership? Is it: a position; a behavior; a style; a relationship; a combination of some of these things; or all the above? If you ask any academic or leader you would get quite a number of opinions. What is known is that the most popular conception is that of an overachieving individual, sitting on top of an organizational hierarchy or an army (Cox, 2019). This concept is still dominant but there has been a progression towards the idea that leadership can take place anywhere in an organization, including "from below."

The COVID-19 pandemic is now widely seen as a milestone in defining the success and failure of leadership. It has presented dramatic new challenges to leaders in politics, business and public health. **How has it also created a need for new definitions and "best practices" concerning leadership?** In the wake of the loss of human life, of vast economic toll and unprecedented disruption, academic studies and "thought leaders" are coming to grips with this question.

Hence this paper's research question, "How has the COVID-19 pandemic changed the concept and practice of leadership?"

To understand how the pandemic has changed the concept of leadership, this paper will look at articles published before and during the COVID-19 pandemic as well as in the later stages, when the worst was seemingly over.

Some Background: A Short History of Leadership:

The concept of leadership leading up to the COVID pandemic has evolved throughout 13,000 years of human history. This section will briefly review the history of the concept and catalog some of the most significant changes. Leadership has evolved from servitude before the 1700s to the thought of people being "Born a Leader" in the 1700s, to today, in which it encapsulates the relationship with the follower.

Leadership outside of Humanity (Since the dawn of Nature)

There are many species of insects and animals that lead in different ways in order to prosper and flourish. One such species, *Bos Taurus* or Cows simplify the process by having one leader who they will follow no matter what they do. And secondly it doesn't matter about which cow has the leadership position, there is no war over leading (Soule, 2018). It also points out that what leaders need are followers and the following is as important as the leading. Another great example are Peter Griffin's honey bees who have a democratic and autocratic leadership. The worker bees together can decide to kill and replace a queen, to choose a place for their colony and places to find resources. The Queen herself has the choice of finding a new home with the help of the worker bees (Van, 2008).

Bees divide their labor in such a way so that they can be as productive as possible. This is why nursing young bees, an easy task, is one of the first tasks that young bees do while older workers go out and forage doing a much harder task. This division of labor: "has often been suggested as the main driver of the ecological success of human and insect societies" (Richardson et al, 2021).

Leadership too can be extremely important in ant teams, as explained in an article by Thomas Richardson and co-authors: "Our study shows that performance in ant teams depends largely on whether or not a key role is filled by an experienced individual, and suggests that in animal teams, not all roles are equally important" (Richardson et al, 2021). That the division of labor is what creates success and having everyone organize themselves in nature could lead to better chances of survival.

Band and Tribal Leadership: (From the start of Humanity - Present)

As humans evolved so did our social organization and resource distribution that had implications for the leaders and followers. An evolution from primates to banding together and working together to collect resources. According to one definition, "Tribal leadership is a shared leadership, organized by the clan system, guided and sustained by elders through the teaching of language and telling of stories."

“Dominance hierarchies are the norm in primate groups; for early humans, collaboration among subordinates reversed this dominance hierarchy and resulted in a democratic leadership style that may have existed for nearly 2.5 million years” (Boehm, 1993).

The point here is that leadership has evolved quite rapidly in only around 13,000 years. It also helped early humans prosper and become more productive than other animals.

“There is good evidence supporting a positive association between division of labor and productivity in humans. For example, novel age- and sex-based divisions of labor arising within human groups in the Upper Paleolithic are thought to have spurred an increase in group foraging efficiency, which may have allowed early humans to out-compete other archaic hominins” (Richard et al, 2021).

In the 21st century, band and tribal leadership is almost only seen in remote areas or within isolated indigenous populations. There are about a 100 uncontacted tribes in the world, most of them located in Brazil (Anthropology, 2014)

Chiefs, Kings and Warlords (13,000 years ago - 1800 though some are still present)

Our social structures started evolving due to the discovery of agriculture approximately 13,000 years ago and with it, humans settling down. This is when people settled down and for the first time there was a surplus in resources that needed to be redistributed. The surplus increased the potential for conflict within and between societal groups. Leaders then acquired extra power to deal with these threats, which in turn resulted in more formalized authority structures which paved the way for the first kingdom and chiefdoms (Van, 2008).

And then during medieval times: Kings or Emperors provided protection and direction in return for the promise of loyalty. Positions of authority were usually embodied in a nobility, especially during feudal times (with some exceptions). During the Hundred Years' War, there were opportunities for some commoners to go higher in rank but that opportunity would disappear later (Knighton, 2017). Leadership then often relied on brutality, as it was more a relationship based more on security than on trust. That is something that leadership has both changed and not changed. An example of it not changing is in the military where there is a big risk for the followers to die in battle.

And philosophical thought did differentiate between western and eastern civilizations. For example, the Chinese Doctrine of the Mandate of Heaven argued that there was a need for rulers but, at the same time, right for subordinates to overthrow them if it was determined that they lacked divine sanction.

Warlords, on the other hand, tend to make their appearance when a kingdom or people is tearing at the seams or a state is failing. This is why warlords continue to play a leadership role in parts of Africa and the Middle East. This is especially the case in Africa due to multiple failed states.

There were, of course, many types of leadership with Rome undergoing the transformation from a Republic to an Empire. There have also been a lot of different philosophies on what leadership should look like and what "good" leadership consists of, notably in the works of Socrates and Aristotle.

State and Business Leadership (around 1773)

The next area of leadership evolution starts roughly with the beginning of the Industrial revolution some 250 years ago. The era of "democracy" came into being with leaders for states being voted in and Socrates' philosophy came to life once again. Communities merged into states and nations, large businesses developed and these all had implications for leadership practices. Citizens in nations are relatively free in terms of going across organizations though workers are still exploited and it is routine for some jobs to be severely undercompensated.

Because of this organizations have stopped or forgotten to work with the constraints humans have, say in a large organization what works better is to divide them into units about the size of hunter and gatherers and have minimal status distinctions between the leader and followers, between the supervisors and subordinates (Van, 2008).

Before the 1900s, one of the leading concepts of leadership was the "Great Man Theory." The Great Man theory is that every leader is born with fixed talent and an inborn ability (Villanovau, 2022).

"Similarly, the great increase in productivity achieved during the industrial revolution was achieved through organizational changes in which generalist 'Jack of all trades' labor practices were superseded by specialization, in which workers focus upon a more restricted task set" (Richard et al, 2021).

It was during the industrial revolution that management was conceptualized as a strictly top-down form of leadership required to make people as productive as possible. The idea of management in its beginnings as a field of study was to make employees as productive as possible. For example, to cut the time required to put a wheel on a car from four to three seconds. It was a more authoritarian form of leadership like in the military where you people were told what to do, based on strict control of people and a centralization of power. Beginning in the 1930s, it moved away to a more influencing version of leadership.

With the 1960s, After World War II, leadership took a bit of a back burner and management became more popular. What people liked in management was that it was supposed to be people who followed what needed to be done.

During the 1980s, many books were written on a new human form of leadership which was seen in books such as *The Leadership Challenge*. The 1990s saw a growing awareness that organizations needed leadership at all levels (Dichter, 1992).

The 21st century has seen the leadership concept challenged and studied by ever more diverse groups of people, often from different cultures and an ever wider range of perspectives. Leadership should even entail humility, according to a 1997 article by Kazuo Inamori. “I therefore continue to repeat myself in saying that no matter how successful you are, you need to maintain your humility and continue in your efforts, always thinking about others and never losing your kind heart. Those are the necessary qualifications for being a leader” (Inamori, 1997). Ideas of best leadership practices remain open to debate.

The Pandemic as an Opportunity to Study and Change Leadership Practices

“Notwithstanding the terrible and devastating effects of this major health crisis, the pandemic offers quite a unique research opportunity for leadership scholars like ourselves, because it enables us to study the possible effects of such a systemic global shock on leadership behavior” (Harry et al, 2022).

Beyond the impact on the study of leadership behavior, there is also a common assumption that COVID-19 will lead to profound changes in the leadership paradigm. Six months into the pandemic (July, 2020), McKinsey, the world's largest global management consultancy, began to explore how the pandemic represented an opportunity to create "new models" of leadership and organizational transformation.

"...leaders now have an opportunity to shift to addressing the underlying thoughts, feelings, and beliefs that ultimately determine whether people will change. Getting “underneath the iceberg” of what motivates individuals to act is crucial to managing the COVID-19 crisis"(Craven, 2020)

However, the "new model" is based on the consultancy's pre-COVID research and recommendations. Essentially, leaders embarking on large-scale change efforts — as so many did during the pandemic — need to "win hearts and minds" using four management building blocks identified by McKinsey: building conviction; reinforcement through formal mechanisms; instilling confidence and developing skills; and role modeling (Craven, 2020).

In the wake of COVID-19, even more recommendations of doing things differently or using new models are regularly seen in leadership academic scholarship and “best practices” papers. More than ever, leadership remains an industry with companies and experts competing to “teach” and “improve” leadership.

Leadership as Co-Creation: Safe Spaces for Motivation and Problem-Solving

One of the hardest-hitting lessons of the COVID-19 crisis for leaders, and the organizations they lead, was the need to create safe space so that people can bring their “whole selves” to work. The challenge acquired a whole new dimension as the crisis transformed work into remote-work in millions of workplaces. In an article titled “Complexity and COVID-19” (Ul-Bien, 2021), Mary Ul discusses how leadership is a co-creation and that this co-creation with followers and leaders is a social phenomenon that co-produces outcomes that can be better or worse. Now, the co-creation often has to happen in a workplace that is virtual. She points out how more research is needed on “adaptive responses (p. 1401),” which require a “space” where leaders are able to adapt quickly under pressure to pandemics such as COVID-19.

Amy Edmondson, Professor of Leadership and Management at the Harvard Business School, sees an opportunity, post-COVID, for people to “gain some appreciation for what being direct and explicit and mindful looks like in our work relationships.” Edmondson writes about three types of action leaders can take to advance a team’s sense of psychological safety: setting a stage that includes a “problem space” where there is an emphasis on uncertainty and challenge; inviting engagement — “inviting participation is the literal act of asking a question”; responding productively to a direct question (Kosner, 2020).

She defines a “problem space” as one in which “failures will happen and things won’t always go according to plan.” That way, “...people feel more free to speak up with crazy ideas.”

“Distributed work is making us realize we have to be more deliberately—more proactively—open. We have to be explicit in sharing our ideas, questions, and concerns, because we can’t just overhear what’s happening in the next cubicle,” she says. “We now have to work a little harder to share what we’re thinking, to ask questions. And then I wonder whether we might be able to import this new sense of deliberateness back into our workplaces when we do go back to them” (Kosner, 2020).

Alma Harris and Michelle Jones, in their article, “School Leadership in Disruptive Times,” (Harris, 2020) list practices by school leaders that could be effective in response to a pandemic — such as self care, consideration, crisis and change management and distributed leadership. The authors write that “effective school leadership is now connected, collaborative, creative and responsive” (Alma, 2022, p246).

Dealing with the Great Resignation

As the COVID-19 pandemic entered a second year in 2021, a mass exodus of American workers from their jobs was underway. In the month of April alone, four million people quit their jobs. In 2023, a number of industries continue to struggle with the fallout of the "Great Resignation" (Merten, 2023). Interestingly, some scholars argue that the pandemic only intensified what was already a long-term trend. "The Great Resignation was no anomaly; the forces underlying it are here to stay (Fuller and Kerr, 2022)."

Could the Great resignation be a wake up call that followers are also as important as leaders? Terms like "adaptive leadership," "co-creation" and "safe spaces" take on new meaning in the face of the "Great Resignation." Dealing with the Great Resignation requires adapting and this is well seen in the research (The Great Resignation, 2022) but time and time again there are some executives and managers who can't or won't change. Early on in the pandemic, it became clear that many executives could not adapt to the rapidly changing needs of their workforce. Joseph Fuller and William Kerr, writing in the Harvard Business Review, suggest one lesson of The Great Resignation — and of the COVID pandemic — is that business leaders will have to do more and offer more to retain employees.

“And the companies best able to attract and retain talent will be those offering benefits that address the changing needs of workers. Similarly, companies that demonstrate a commitment to improving their employees long-term career prospects by offering training and tuition reimbursements will garner greater loyalty and gain in stature with prospective employees”(Mondelli, 2022)

This is one area where leadership has to do their best in retaining their followers and adapting to what these people need and want. Where leadership works best, which leadership works best and if it needs to be shared.

Of course, some business leaders argue that the increased labor costs would put them out of business. Offshoring remains an alternative in many industries. And, in some industries, there is a move to loosen child labor laws so that youth under the age of 16 can enter the workforce.

Challenge of Greater Inequality

The coronavirus crisis highlighted the responsibility of business leaders to create more equal access to opportunities in the workplace. Pre-existing systemic inequalities led to even greater disparities during the pandemic — in access to healthcare, childcare, technology and even green spaces.

The COVID recession impacted women more than men. A survey of North American female employees during the COVID crisis found that one in four women were thinking about reducing or leaving paid work because of their company's inflexibility, caring responsibilities and stress (Ro, 2022).

As women and minorities were disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, some companies as the McKinsey report noted, made the situation even worse by using the pandemic as an excuse to cut back on Inclusion and Diversity policies, "...some companies appear to be viewing I&D as a 'luxury we cannot afford' during the crisis (Diversity Still Matters, 2020)." These companies "risk tarnishing their license to operate in the long term and will lose out on opportunities to innovate their business models and strengthen their recovery."

Yet, in the midst of the crisis, it was widely acknowledged that women often demonstrated exceptional qualities of leadership. New Zealand's Prime Minister Jacinda Adern was one of the most visible examples of successful leadership during the COVID-19 crisis. An article on the lessons from New Zealand's approach to COVID-19 concluded that: "the government fostered a shared purpose, minimized harm to lives and livelihoods, was led by expertise, mobilized a collective effort, and enabled coping" (Wilson, 2020).

A McKinsey report pointed out that "cities and countries with women leaders are thought to be facing the COVID-19 pandemic more successfully than those without them (McKinsey Quarterly, 2020)." The report cited research that a "trust advantage" gives women leaders an edge.

"Similarly, our previous research found that women tend to demonstrate, more often than men, five of the nine types of leadership behavior that improve organizational performance, including talent development. Women also more frequently apply three of the four types of behavior—intellectual stimulation, inspiration, and participative decision making—that most effectively address the global challenges of the future" (Dolan, 2020).

Intangible Assets

Evidence suggests that COVID-19 crisis accelerated a long-term trend towards placing a higher value on intangible assets — like reputation, human capital, and intellectual property. According to one expert in business ethics, "COVID-19 has ushered in the age of the 'intangible company'" (Taylor, 2020). Already, near the beginning of the pandemic, *The Economist* reported that "61% of the market value of the S&P 500 sits in intangibles such as research and development, customers linked by network effects, brands and data" (Economist, 2020).

With COVID-19 there has been even greater pressure on leaders to address environmental and social risks and opportunities. According to a Lloyd's/KPMG study, executives now have to deal with a new "social contract" between business and society.

Restrictions enforced for public health purposes have accelerated progression towards a new reality. An increasing number of executives have started questioning the return to normal even after COVID-19 disappears. That means that we suddenly have a world where most of the workforce and business data (including potential trade secrets) is scattered across thousands of living rooms, kitchens, and bedrooms, while expensive office buildings are kept empty. Not only does it become more difficult to manage intellectual property in such an environment, but additionally the traditional ways of managing teams and culture have to be rethought. (assets, 2020)

Due to this evolution, leadership is going to have to keep track of more factors especially with remote work and it will be more imperative to offer fulfilling work. This does not change the leadership concept, but leadership strategies will involve taking on new roles. While organizations have ever more access to data, COVID-19 highlighted the need for greater insight to value intangible assets, particularly human capital. In the wake of COVID, leadership faces new challenges to build trust and equity among employees. It could be, however, a real opportunity for executives that get it right. "Both millennial and Gen-Z employees are far more inclined to challenge the authority once conferred by age and experience. Many openly question whether a company's stated values are genuine. This has spurred an increase in hierarchical disputes about values and inclusion" (Taylor, 2020).

What's Next for Leadership?

While the COVID-19 pandemic is not yet over, the US and the World Health Organization no longer define it as a public health emergency requiring extraordinary measures and mandates. However, a reset to "normal" seems unlikely. A recent Gallup poll found that nearly half of Americans think their lives will never return to pre-pandemic normalcy (Brenan, 2023).

The study of how the COVID-19 pandemic changed leadership is ongoing. One clear trend in leadership research is to outline a "new model" of leadership, based on the "new reality," that nevertheless mostly recycles pre-COVID research and recommendations, as is the case with the already mentioned McKinsey leadership "lessons."

In one study — "The pandemic that shocked managers across the world: The impact of the COVID-19 crisis on leadership behavior" — the authors document a notable pandemic-driven increase in Directive Leadership, a task-oriented style of leadership, in which the leader takes an active role in setting clear objectives and ensuring employees follow through on them.

“The results clearly show that the COVID-19 crisis especially led to an increase of directive leadership of lower level managers, and of managers who worked in sectors with low and mid levels of WFHP [work from home productivity](Stoker et al, 2022)

However, the authors also note that "in line with earlier findings (Stoker et al., 2019), the results seem to suggest that the increase in directive leadership was temporary," stopping after June, 2020.

In their summing up, they question whether it is an effective or desirable outcome: "...whether such an increase in directive leadership in these contexts is effective is rather doubtful (see also Stoker et al., 2022), and such behavior might even be detrimental to performance or innovation” (Somech, 2005).

"When might Directive Leadership, in particular, be a help or a hindrance in organizations?" another, post-pandemic paper asks. The authors, House and Mitchell, suggest that it all depends. In a situation where organizational procedures, rules, and policies are unclear, “a leader behaving in a directive manner complements the tasks and the organization by providing the necessary guidance and psychological structure for subordinates.” By contrast, “when task demands are clear to subordinates, leader directiveness is seen more as a hindrance.” Furthermore, the authors also cite research that Participative Leadership might be more effective in unfamiliar emergencies — i.e. a pandemic, for example.

In the wake of the COVID crisis, with calls for different decision-making and leadership styles, the academic debate over Directive vs. Participative Leadership debate hardly seems like an adequate response.

In some leadership circles, there seems to be an urgent desire for a return to the pre-COVID-19 social order. However, in other parts of the society, there seems to be support for change (Brown, 2022). Unsurprisingly, leadership, as a reflection of society, is also divided. Brown discusses changes in the business sector that seem to lean towards more support, post-COVID, for sustainability, for the fight against climate change and stakeholder capitalism. There are also calls for more entrepreneurial thinking to address social justice issues within and without businesses (Brown, 2022).

Much of the empirical evidence for what COVID 19 did or didn't change in leadership practices is still relatively ambiguous. So it is too early to say that "business as usual" is gone for good.

COVID furthered and deepened long term trends, as discussed, accelerating the great resignation and a dramatic revaluation of intangible assets like reputation, intellectual property and human

capital. In response, there is a clear need for a new leadership mindset. Potential "best practices" begin with a focus on employees as whole human beings with equal access to opportunities at work. A radical new level of experimentation, innovation and openness is arguably another best practice, one that allows employees to speak freely and bring their whole selves to work.

These kinds of best practices, as outlined above, should help leaders do a better job of "managing the unknown" — unforeseeable changes as society faces severe global warming, new epidemics, and potential food and water scarcities. "The key leadership challenge of the 2020s will be to present a clear vision and moral narrative for organizations – one that recognizes our broad human interdependence and the threats that face our planet" (Taylor, 2020).

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Harris, Alma, and Michelle Jones. "COVID 19 - School Leadership in Disruptive Times." *School Leadership & Management*, vol. 40, no. 4, 2020, pp. 243–47, doi:10.1080/13632434.2020.1811479.

This paper explores leadership in school and what are some of the actions that can be done. Actions such as alternative solutions to trying to make sure that students are able to learn and teachers are able to get the resources they need. This is also a great article on how there aren't really the best actions, the best solution but a guess on what can be done and what the leader can do with the resources available. This really helps my paper as it gives a better understanding on the complexity of leadership during COVID-19. It also discusses that during COVID-19 there was no precedent for dealing with the crises, no preparation, and in some ways the way to lead will have to be figured out by the leaders themselves.

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This is a great article as it is looking at understanding leadership during a crisis and how it is an opportunity to rediscover one's core values and change them. It finds that the principles of leadership during a crisis are: communication, Core Values, Decision Making, Realism, Innovation and Humanism. That crisis breeds opportunity to grow and improve. That preparation and preparation can really help future leaders to be better prepared for a new crisis.

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