



Lesson Learned From The Covid-19 Pandemic: An Examination of Leadership Roles in Telecommunication Company During Crisis

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to investigate the crisis phase and the role of leadership in one of the telecommunications companies in Indonesia that implemented a system of working remotely during the Covid-19 pandemic. This study used a case study methodology with a qualitative approach. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and related documentation. Technical data analysis was carried out through data condensation, data presentation, drawing conclusions, and verifying findings. The results of the study indicate that the leadership role during the Covid-19 pandemic was as follows: pre-crisis phase, peak crisis phase, and post-crisis phase. The pre-crisis phase of the leader guided the team to adapt to the pandemic through planning, information dissemination, and operational coordination. During the crisis phase and the peak of the crisis, the leader played a role in controlling through the provision of motivation, empathy, and inspiration. In the post-crisis phase, the leader's role was to support the recovery process through empowerment, collaboration, and team involvement. The implications of this study are on the importance of the role of leaders who adjust to the phase being faced to be able to bring the organization through difficult times.

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INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic has been a heavy blow to most industries in Indonesia. Supply chain disruptions as well as declining marketing volumes and profits are among the obstacles experienced during the pandemic. The government declared this situation a national disaster through Presidential Decree no. 12 of 2020 on April 14, 2020, with a regulatory design to suppress the spread of virus transmission. One of the regulations that have an impact on the industry is the limitation of space for movement leading to increasingly complex and significant impacts, one of which is the threat of layoffs and even bankruptcy. The sudden and unpredictable nature of the crisis requires

leaders to have behaviors and mindsets that can control overreaction to these conditions (D'auria & Smet, 2020).

To investigate how leaders overcome and respond to crisis challenges in telecommunication companies, it is necessary to identify the actions and roles carried out during the Covid-19 pandemic. Leaders have an important role in increasing team motivation to produce the best performance (Bahadur & Ali, 2021). Motivation is given by the leader to the team through various forms, both material, namely gifts, and non-material such as praise. In the context of a limited and isolated environment, leadership roles are identified, namely task roles and support roles (Wang & Wu, 2015). The role of the task relates to the process of work and operational activities to realize the mission which is quite crucial in the initial phase of the project. Supportive roles focus on interpersonal relationship activities that increase morale, and emotional support needed when in long and tiring situations. A leader needs to balance, organize and push tasks forward while providing support when team morale is at a low point (Wu et al, 2020). A mission carried out over a long period is an important factor for leadership. The initial period that is identical to the need for the team to adapt to the new environment highlight the role of the task for the leader. The next stage is when the situation is getting under control and adapting to the new atmosphere (Wu et al, 2020)

The Covid-19 pandemic is one of the longest health crises ever experienced. The initial timeframe is 2020 to 2021 and has not yet been declared fully handled. The process of working remotely for long periods leads to boredom, isolation, and social contact issues. This situation requires support from fellow teams as well as from the leaders. The social support provided by the leader might increase morale, and foster cohesion as well as a sense of well-being based on involvement with the group which in turn increases motivation and enthusiasm to produce the best (Ivey & Mantler, 2015).

Participative leaders take a big role in team engagement, as they are values-based and member-centered and value their contributions. Participative leaders can increase team motivation to join collective goal-setting and share contributions to increase team effectiveness (Ali et al., 2020). Certain leadership styles can encourage certain team behavioral responses as well (Yang, Huang, & Wu, 2019). The role of participatory leaders is very dominant in strengthening morale which will ultimately affect the team's perspective of the leader and goals through the confidence that their opinions and ideas are valuable. Team orientation toward goals is closely related to participatory leadership which empowers members to choose their work style in realizing common goals effectively. (Burmeister et al., 2020)

A crisis gives various challenges to be experienced by the organization which is difficult to get through without prior preparation (Supandi, 2022). A number of competencies are needed to be able to lead the organization and respond to future challenges. The role of a leader who provides guidance can improve team competence through training, critical thinking, strengthening character education, and technology-based learning. The spirit and sincere attitude shown by the leader play a role in increasing the team's fighting power to face and survive crises (Djumiko et al., 2020). The form of strength given by the leader is a sense of empathy for the situation that is being faced by all teams. Empathy is the ability to properly understand the needs of others, and interpret properly and correctly the feelings and thoughts of others.

The background of the studies as well as previous studies mentions that the leader has a crucial and quite large role in a crisis. Thus, this study was conducted as an attempt to explore the role of leadership based on the Covid-19 pandemic phase where employees and leaders work remotely for around one and a half years. This study was aimed at investigating the role of leaders in the company during the initial, peak, and final phases of the pandemic.

RESEARCH METHOD

The study was carried out at one of the Indonesian telecommunications firms utilizing a qualitative approach and a case study methodology. The case study method allows researchers to conduct an in-depth and detailed exploration of complex phenomena in certain contexts (Thomas, 2021). This study aims to provide a detailed description of the role of leadership in telecommunications companies that work remotely during the Covid-19 pandemic. Data were collected through purposive sampling. Eight informants from the company were located as managers at the level of managers and general managers. Their work period ranged from 10 years to 20 years, with a minimum educational background of an undergraduate degree. Informants were leaders who carried out leadership activities in their daily life with a remote working pattern during the pandemic. The data collection process was carried out through in-depth interviews, field observations, and documentation of leaders' daily activity log book. Technical data analysis was carried out through data condensation, data presentation, drawing conclusions, and verifying results (Miles et al., 2014).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

1. Crisis Phase

A crisis is a situation that can be distinguished from normal situations in terms of challenges, ambiguity, perceived urgency, and stakes for the survival of the organization. Furthermore, crises rarely occur over some time and have the potential to significantly and adversely affect the organization and its stakeholders (James et al., 2011).

As one of the leaders in the telecommunications company, an informant, named BM, mentioned that he could recognize the pandemic situation as a crisis through the news circulating in the media. The highest leader in this case the CEO at the center formed a special task force to be able to deal with this situation. Another informant, namely PJ, who was the service manager, felt the impact of a late delivery process, and some supplies from suppliers began to stagnate, especially materials that had to be imported from abroad. HP, an informant positioned as a finance manager admitted that he could recognize the pandemic as a crisis when he received reports of several payments from customers being delayed and some even asking for cost cuts.

A pandemic is a global crisis that has an impact on a very wide range of stakeholders, while crisis response is complicated by the very high interdependence of these stakeholders (Ansell et al., 2020). As a leader, AF, a sales manager, witnessing the pandemic conditions raised doubts about making decisions because the actions taken cannot be decided unilaterally considering that there were still higher leaders. The decision-making process became more complicated due to the excess caused was greater and had an impact than in the previous normal situation. The pandemic had no small impact and threatened the continuity of the business process, which was conveyed by all leaders, one of them from the finance, infrastructure, sales, and services divisions. The uncertainty at the center of the COVID-19 pandemic, the extent of economic and industrial damage worldwide, and the loss of financial, physical, and food security for many people all show the magnitude of the impact of this crisis (McKee and Stuckler, 2020). MZ, an infrastructure manager, conveyed that the difficulty in replacing telecommunication equipment and spare parts were becoming rare because several suppliers stated that their goods were stuck at customs as a result of the mobility restriction or well known as lockdown.

From a time perspective, the crisis phase identified by the number of studies is divided into several parts. The three-stage approach is widely used to describe crisis phases, including pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis (Coombs and Laufer, 2018). BM as the general manager stated that the pre-crisis situation was in the range of December 2019 to February 2020 when news about the Corona Virus spread in China but had not yet been declared to have entered Indonesia. during that time,

there was no panic, instead, he felt optimistic that the virus would not enter Indonesia. Leaders received signals of an unusual situation even though the situation was not in their immediate environment. The crisis phase was a situation where the leader felt a different condition from the previous situation. The operational manager, GB, said that the government's decision to do mobility restrictions in vulnerable locations made him aware that the crisis was at its peak and was ongoing. The CEO-level leader issued an order that all employees work from home except for essential personnel who must continue to work from the office but with fairly tight security. At this telecommunication company, the policy of working from home or working remotely was carried out starting in March 2020. The composition of employees who were allowed to work from the office was less than 10% and the rest must work from home. The last phase, the post-crisis phase, was marked by the loosening of the rules for working on a hybrid model or a combination of working from home and working from the office in turn. The hybrid work model was one of the leaders' responses in responding to the increasingly controlled pandemic situation even though the country of Indonesia had not been declared completely free from the Covid 19 virus.

Other researchers divided the crisis phase into five stages: signal detection, prevention and preparedness, damage containment and control, company recovery, and learning and reflection (Wooten and James, 2008). The leader's focus on team conditions increases during the pandemic phase despite the separation of work locations. Caringa-Go et al., (2021) suggest that leadership focus is on the containment and damage control phases. This phase is at a critical time when the crisis has hit and drastically affected the organization and its members. Leaders feel the emotions of some individuals differently than in normal situations and show increased levels of stress. During this period, negative emotions such as fear and anxiety are common (Caringal-Go et al., 2021). The results of research interviews indicate that leaders in telecommunication companies identified the crisis phase into three parts, namely the initial phase or crisis, the peak phase of the crisis, and the final phase of the crisis with different orientations in each phase.

2. Leadership Role During Pre-Crisis Phase

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the international spotlight was on world leaders, while at the organizational level, the spotlight was on the highest organizational leaders at the CEO level and even general managers and managers. Anyone who became a leader could not be separated from the spotlight, both behavior and decisions taken. It is undeniable that the pandemic had caused an explosion in the number of research studies on leadership with various focus issues including communication, trust, responsibility, behavior, readiness development, stress, and so on. Several studies and books have found the need for charismatic leadership that can solve problems in situations of crisis and ambiguity (Antonakis, 2021), while others found the reasons for the variation in the Covid-19 response (Capano et al., 2020). Many lessons can be learned from the initial responses of leaders in government during the early phase of the pandemic situation that gave rise to uncertainty (Boin et al., 2020).

Based on the results of research interviews, the framework for leaders in the early phase of the pandemic in telecommunications companies was decided by the highest leadership, namely the CEO, assisted by advisers who are members of a special work unit. The framework was in the form of planning, information dissemination, and operational coordination. The plans made include: deciding the pattern of working from home based on technology to support daily activities and establishing a new business process that adapts the policy of working virtually. After the planning process, the next step was the dissemination of information to all teams. Before the information was received by the team, the leaders carried out verification to avoid misperceptions and multiple interpretations between members. Information was provided through a meeting mechanism with the highest leadership, namely the CEO, then a medium-scale meeting of each Division led by the general manager or manager level. Verbal delivery, even through Zoom and Microsoft Teams, is considered effective enough to minimize rumors or uncertainty. Moreover, all teams also received an email containing a notification or warning of danger as well as a step guide in the event of an

emergency. In the early phase of the pandemic or crisis, leaders focused on continuing assignments normally even though the patterns applied were different. The second focus was the result because of the demand for leaders to stabilize the company's condition through good performance results with the minimum possible impact of the situation. The typology of leadership in the early days of the pandemic emerged, including openness and integrative positive thinking (Maak et al, 2021). Coordination during the initial phase of the pandemic was carried out quite significantly between leaders and with teams to keep everything within the same framework and goal, which was to be ready to face crises where the majority did not know when the peak might occur or end. At last, the leader's actions in the early phase of the pandemic were aimed at adequate prevention while ensuring that employees were not affected by the crisis.

3. Leadership Role During the Peak Phase of the Crisis

The literature on crisis management emphasizes that during times of crisis, people look to individuals for direction, comfort, and stability rather than to institutions. Therefore, a leader's interpersonal skills are most tested during times of crisis (Rose & Maruoka, 2022). Five key stages of crisis leadership are initiated, among others: sense-making of what is happening, namely understanding the crisis correctly and appropriately, decision-making and coordination, forming meaning for the team to understand the situation, accountability, and learning.

This study which was conducted at a telecommunications company found the framework formed by leaders during the crisis phase and its peak. The framework consisted of monitoring and controlling processes but focused on humans, namely teams that mostly work virtually from home. The role of providing motivation, inspiration, and moral support is one of the main tasks of leaders in this phase. The high level of stress as a result of uncertainty, the number of reports of deaths, and the threat of layoffs became one of the triggering factors. Human orientation was shown by the leader through empathy and providing moral support to the team. The leader greeted team members personally via video call, phone, chat, or email. Emotional exhaustion because the pandemic situation lasted for quite a long time was felt by most team members and even the leader himself. The leader's job was to encourage them to stay afloat in the face of these situations, some of which have resulted in the death of team members and even their families.

The purpose of the leader's job and function was to promote a culture of trust by sustaining the team's stability through flexible control. The mechanism of working remotely had its challenges for leaders, especially regarding communication. Excessive communication intensity, for example too frequent video calls or chatting, is seen as a form of stalking and distrust by team members. Therefore, the leader's ability to measure and behave within reasonable limits is quite important.

The role of inspiring was shown by the leader through positive actions. One of the attributes of leadership was the ability to inspire through actions to get a greater response from team members than only through words. A study conducted by Kapucu and Ustun (2018) found that the crisis leadership model has the main attributes, namely traits and skills consisting of assertiveness, communication, flexibility, and behavior. The model is still grouping related behaviors, among others: those related to tasks, orientation to people, orientation to the organization, environmental scanning, and strategic planning. Leadership during a crisis ultimately bears the accumulation of problems both from their internal leaders and external ones, one of which is the urgency of time.

4. Leadership Role During the Post-Crisis Phase

Although the pandemic has not yet been officially declared over, things are gradually getting back to normal. The pattern of working from the office has begun even though as a company it is still implementing a hybrid work mechanism, which is a combination of online and offline. Even though the pandemic is getting under control and the situation is moving normally, the role of the leader cannot be separated from the situation that has been experienced before. Recovery became the main agenda for leaders after the pre-crisis phase and the peak of the crisis occurred. The orientation of the recovery process is holistic, namely towards the organization and people. The leader's role in the organization at this phase included the management of unexpected situations.

During normal times few companies have management or personnel in place for emergencies. The pandemic that has been experienced by leaders in telecommunications companies proved the importance of managing unexpected situations. They create the right leadership, resource, and governance mechanisms to pursue opportunities and defend against threats. The HRD team sets a new standard for leadership and follow-up in the organization that is in line with management governance that is ready to face any situation.

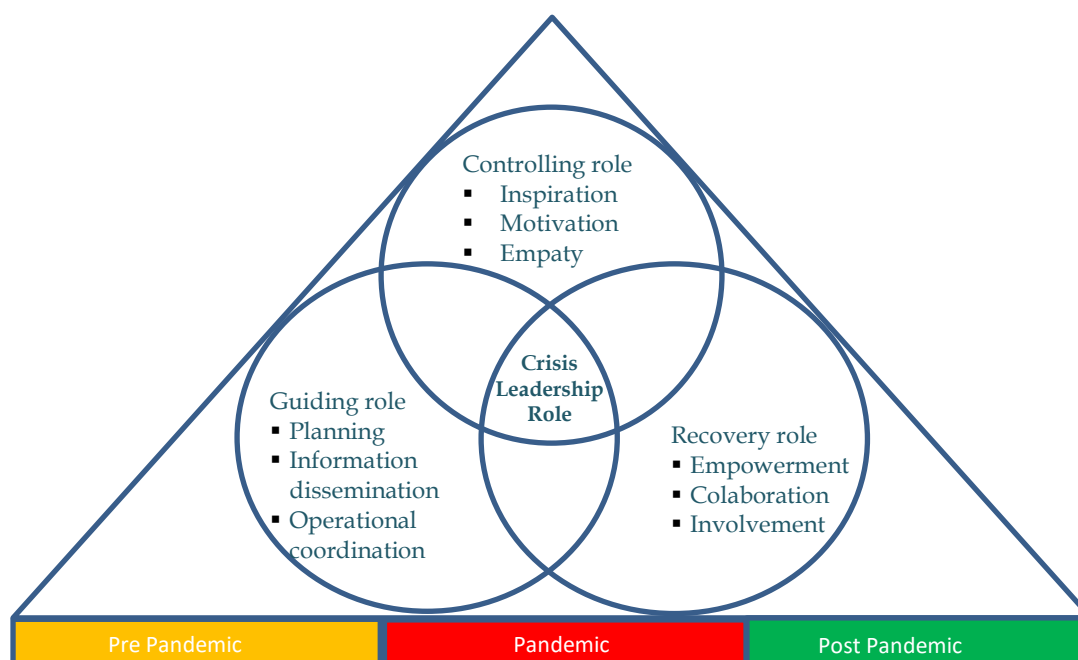


Figure 1: Frame Work Crisis Leadership Role

The role of recovery with a human orientation was that team members were carried out by leaders through trauma healing for those who had experienced the emotional impact as a result of the pandemic causing many deaths, empowering, collaborating, and ensuring everyone was connected to their colleagues. Team building was carried out not only in one division but between divisions, friendly sports matches and the creation of a workspace without partitions were one of the recovery actions to increase the involvement and bonding of fellow team members.

The efforts of leaders in telecommunications companies to perform different roles according to the crisis phase were divided into three phases, namely pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis phases. To address the leader's function from the beginning to the end of the pandemic, a framework of the leader's position as a guide in the early phase, the role of support in the crisis phase, and the role of providing support in the post-crisis phase was established.

CONCLUSION

Leadership in times of crisis presents unique issues, and it demands readiness to meet them and guide the business through the turbulence period safely. Leadership that understands the pandemic based on its characteristics and phases will be able to adjust the role that is carried out by the team. To maintain the continuity of the organization in an unexpected crisis and require a leader's response, a breakthrough framework is needed that is prepared as a role reference for leaders. The role guides the team through the planning, and dissemination of information in the pre-crisis phase. The role of controlling is carried out through motivation, empathy, and inspiration to the team in the crisis phase and at the peak of the crisis. The role of providing support for recovery/recovery in

the post-crisis phase. Through the implementation of a leadership role that is aligned with the crisis phase, the leader in this telecommunications company can maintain the company's continuity and even continue to grow even in turbulent situations. This study has limitations because it looks at the role of leaders based on the phases of the crisis. In the future, it is advised to conduct thorough research to achieve leadership positions in crises from perspectives other than the phase, one of which is the perspective of employees as followers.

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