

# Covid-19: Leadership styles and outcomes

**Eric McNulty** and **Lyndon Bird** share the findings of a joint study on multi-sector trends during the pandemic, revealing key insights for improving readiness and enhancing leadership qualities

**F**or years, resilience professionals and academics have stressed the inevitability of an eventual global pandemic. During this century alone, we have had several health emergencies that could have triggered such a crisis – SARS (2002), H5N1 flu (2006), H1N1 flu (2009), MERS (2015) and Ebola (2016). However, once these infections were brought under control, the inevitable call for lessons to be learned was often not heeded, or at least not beyond the direct medical treatments discovered.

The original infection that became named Covid-19 probably appeared in Wuhan, Hubei province, China in late October 2019. The first case in the US was confirmed by the CDC on January 21, 2020. Once it

started to spread rapidly, the failure to apply earlier lessons identified became apparent as organisations across sectors struggled to respond and adapt. The situation also provided an extraordinary opportunity to observe what worked and what could be improved.

Two organisations, the National Preparedness Leadership Initiative based at Harvard University (NPLI) and New York-based Disaster Recovery Institute (DRI), monitored the situation individually throughout 2020 and 2021. They agreed to collaborate to identify the decisions and actions that worked well across all sectors and those found to be less effective.

This article covers the period up to the end

of July 2021. At that point, in the US alone, more than 37 million cases had resulted in more than 600,000 deaths.

The research team suspected that there were lessons common to all sectors to be learned that would add value to preparedness against future crises. Executives from nine major private sector US-based organisations were interviewed in 90-minute sessions, hailing from the aviation, energy, higher education, healthcare, manufacturing, retail and technology sectors. The study concentrated on the US, to give consistency and exclude national differences in disease patterns, political decisions and medical capabilities.

The meta-leadership framework pioneered by NPLI helped frame the analysis of the interviews. Meta-leaders often operate beyond the formal boundaries set by organisational structures and job specifications. Such leaders try to influence change beyond their levels of authority; they take a holistic view of challenges, linking and using wider connectivity techniques internally and externally. Meta-leadership is a practical way of managing complex, multifaceted crisis situations. In a pandemic, the ability to inspire a wide range of people – all with different priorities, skills, attitudes and personal attributes – is crucial.

Initially, there was little known about the SARS-COV-2 virus or how it spread. Naturally, this caused concern and some degree of panic among the public. The US Government, like others, mandated strong restrictions to try to stem increasing cases and rising death toll. It soon became obvious that the pandemic was not just a public health crisis. The measures created other problems, resulting in business and school closures, restrictions on mass transit and severe limitations on personal freedom. Significant reductions in income, an immediate rise in unemployment and virtual shutdown of much of the manufacturing, services and transportation sectors were unmistakable evidence of the economic damage.

The US was also severely affected by social unrest following the killing of George Floyd and record numbers of tropical storms, hurricanes and wildfires. The Presidential campaign added to the challenges – with the pandemic response itself becoming a highly polarised political issue. General acceptance of information provided by government agencies was constantly disputed online.

These multiple factors, sometimes involving overlapping crises to be managed concurrently, caused a unique set of challenges needing innovative solutions from crisis leaders.

Although responses obviously varied, the researchers identified a common theme that senior executive leaders had generally performed well. It seemed that the enormity and universality of the threat focused minds on what really mattered – and that was clearly people, not just profits. Many testimonies to this were noted across all sectors. A few examples included: “Our initial concerns were for our associates, their families and everyone’s safety,” and: “Our priorities were clear, protecting the health of our employees by limiting their exposure to infection – business continuity came very much second,” as well as: “Our CEO stated unequivocally that we would do what was necessary to protect our people – I don’t care what it costs – we must do the right thing.”

It would be useful to include the need for such people-first pivots into future planning and exercising.

Providing wide-scale support is easier said than done, and many things that had to be accomplished were new to companies. Help was needed financially, socially and medically. Most of the companies interviewed provided many benefits that would not be included in any formal crisis plan. A good example was offering free infant care for those affected by school and nursery closures. It was clear that the best performing organisations quickly understood that they had to address secondary and even tertiary considerations to support employees. Those that succeeded best were the ones that

understood the emotional stress that many of their staff were under and recognised that decisions had to factor in the effect not only on worker availability, but also on engagement and resilience. This was summed up by one interviewee: “Sometimes, as a large corporation, we drift away from people and we focus on profits, R&D and technology. The pandemic has been an exceptional reminder of how critical people are. It has given the executive leadership a new focus – if you look after your people, they look after you.”

Another, pithier point was: “If ever there was a time to walk the talk, this was it – and we did it.”

Future preparedness will benefit if such secondary and tertiary considerations – from social support to technology procurement – are addressed in detail in planning scenarios.

## Flexible mindset

However, no incident ever unfolds exactly as expected and no plan can cover every contingency. A flexible mindset is probably the attribute that marks out appropriate leadership in a crisis context. The ability to understand and use existing protocols is important, but the need to pivot as circumstances change is vital.

The meta-leadership framework has three dimensions to help leaders focus: The situation; the person; and connectivity. Where there were some perceived weaknesses, they were often in internal communication processes found to be too slow or too inconsistent to create situational clarity and foster the robust connectivity necessary to achieve synchrony between different units of an organisation and to influence external stakeholders.

A pandemic response of this magnitude also required new ways of flattening the organisation to aid faster decision-making and improve staff communications. These findings are a prompt for business continuity professionals to work hand-in-hand with their corporate communications colleagues for internal as well as external messaging and executive visibility.

There is nothing positive about living through a major pandemic. However, there are certainly many learning opportunities from which we can all benefit. Many firms will partially revert to what were previously normal operations, although we believe that some changes worked so well that they will become accepted practice. Obviously, the switches towards more home-working, online meetings and less business travel seem likely to continue, having been accelerated by the pandemic.

We believe the long-lasting change will be in the appreciation that employee wellbeing – including mental health – is a key component of business success.

NPLI and DRI will include insights from the research in teaching programmes and publications. The authors appreciate the co-operation provided by interviewees and their organisations. We hope that our findings, which are available as full reports, will stimulate the integration of these insights into business continuity and disaster response plans and protocols. CRJ

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■ The full report is titled Covid-19: An Analysis of Leadership Styles and Outcomes: Multi-sector trends from January 2019 through August 2021

