279 Reflecting on educational leadership during COVID-19: Experiences of Finnish higher education leaders and lessons for future crises and emergencies

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Research Domains

Management, leadership, governance and quality (MLGQ)

Abstract

Crisis leadership research has a long history in business, but less so in higher education. Crisis leadership pre-COVID generally focused on acute crises, which raises the questions: what lessons can be learned from the experiences of higher education leadership during COVID, and how does existing crisis leadership theory align with the experiences of leaders managing a chronic crisis?

I conducted a qualitative investigation into leadership at a Finnish university during COVID. Nine leaders varying in institutional hierarchy and unit participated in semi-structured interviews; transcripts and documents were analyzed descriptively (to identify which groups directed campus discourses) and thematically (to identify how leadership was conducted).

Results supported the core concepts of existing crisis leadership theory, but identified new elements potentially important for successful leadership during chronic crises. The identified themes have been integrated into a model of crisis leadership featuring culture and context, preparation, information flow, adaptive leadership, and time.

Full paper

Crisis leadership research as a field has a long history in business, but less so in education, and even less so in higher education. Core elements of existing crisis leadership theory include dividing crises into phases (early-, in-, and post-crisis; e.g., Wu et al., 2021), and existing educational crisis leadership research has highlighted the importance of adaptive leadership, collaboration, communication, complex decision making, context, and well-being (Striepe and Cunningham, 2021).
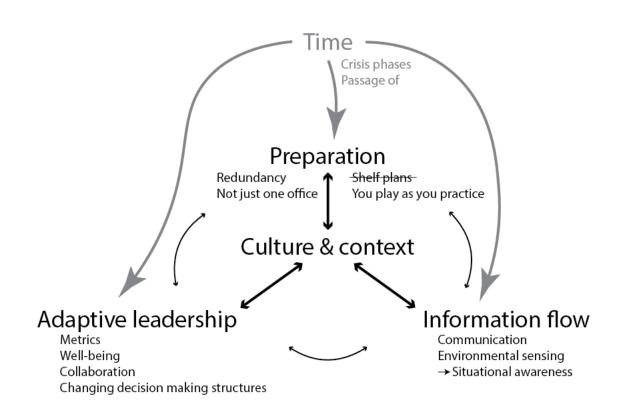
The SARS-CoV-2 virus's arrival in 2019 caused a resulting multi-year global pandemic. Unfortunately, nearly all crisis leadership pre-COVID focused on acute, short-term crises, which raises the questions: what lessons can be learned from the experiences of higher education leadership during COVID, and how does existing crisis leadership theory align with the experiences of leaders managing a chronic crisis?

In this paper I report the results of a qualitative investigation into leadership at a Finnish university during COVID. Nine leaders varying in institutional hierarchy and unit participated in semi-structured interviews; transcripts and collected documents, including university press releases, were triangulated and analyzed descriptively (to identify which groups directed campus discourses) and thematically (to identify how leadership was conducted).

Between March 2020 and April 2022 the university alternated between periods of campus closures and openings, with the first closure in mid-March coming as a surprise to many leaders. During closures, most teaching and research was conducted remotely, and during openings activities could take place with COVID-related restrictions limiting on-campus activities, with progressively fewer limitations as time went on. By April of 2022 functionally all COVID-related restrictions at the campus had been removed and on-campus operations were prioritized.

Overall, results supported the core concepts of existing crisis leadership theory, but identified new elements potentially important for successful leadership during chronic crises. Newly identified themes include time, information flow, metrics, and culture. These themes were integrated into a model of crisis leadership, which highlights the importance and interaction between culture and context, preparation, information flow, adaptive leadership, and time (figure 1).

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Time
Crisis phases
Passage of

Preparation
Redundancy
Not just one office

~~Shelf plans~~
You play as you practice

Culture & context

Adaptive leadership
Metrics
Well-being
Collaboration
Changing decision making structures

Information flow
Communication
Environmental sensing
→ Situational awareness

The importance of thoughtful use of metrics was highlighted. Before the Omicron variant emerged in November 2021, leadership had clear, frequently-reported metrics that guided decision making at many levels: the number of infected and quarantined staff and students in each unit. Post-Omicron these data were no longer collected, and no replacement metrics were chosen, which coincides with a lack of clarity and focus in discussions of leadership decision making in the Omicron phase of the crisis (late 2021 and onwards).

The university dramatically altered its leadership practices during the crisis. An existing committee consisting of the heads of all faculty/division-level units on campus became the center of crisis discourse, meeting frequently and strongly influencing the rector's final decisions. Other groups on campus, especially those that met less frequently, were less involved in leadership discourses, and questions were often preferentially routed to the more frequently meeting group.

While decision making was essentially top-down at the highest levels, when rapid decision making was required leadership appeared to revert from a managerially-influenced system to a more collegial system that prioritized organic networks of contacts over formal meetings. This organic system has great potential for efficient, adaptive, and rapid crisis decision making, but requires formalization and community awareness to ensure equity and fairness in application.

While leadership was overall successful at mitigating the effects of COVID in the pre-Omicron phase of the crisis, two missed opportunities emerged from the analysis. The pre-crisis phase, wherein the campus had multiple weeks between the start of lockdowns in other countries and the beginning of campus closures in Finland, was not used optimally. This left campus leadership, especially at the dean level and below, almost completely unprepared for the campus closures in mid March. The second missed opportunity was a near complete lack of discussion among interviewed leadership regarding enhancing equity in the return to campus operations in the Omicron phase of the crisis. Campus leadership pushed a return to campus operations for both staff and students without appearing to discuss the possible inclusivity costs of such decisions (e.g., to those unable to be on campus or those at high risk of negative outcomes from infectious disease).

The study resulted in two policy recommendations being identified. First, continued support for the development of, and expansion of the guidelines for, nationally-required university contingency plans would likely facilitate successful management of future crises. Second, reconsideration of funding models during crises could help prevent misalignments between leadership's fiscal motivations and the needs of the university community during a crisis.

References

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Wu, Y. L., Shao, B., Newman, A. & Schwarz, G. (2021). Crisis leadership: A review and future research agenda. The Leadership Quarterly, 32(6), 101518. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2021.101518