Faculteit Bedrijfseconomische Wetenschappen

master in de handelswetenschappen

Masterthesis

How Frontlines leaders and managers adapted their leadership style during COVID-19

Ruben Girginol

Scriptie ingediend tot het behalen van de graad van master in de handelswetenschappen, afstudeerrichting ondernemerschap en management

PROMOTOR :

dr. Elien VANDENBROUCKE

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Thank word

Ik ben een masterstudent Handelswetenschappen aan de Universiteit Hasselt. Ik heb ervoor gekozen om in het kader van mijn masterproef door middel van een literatuurstudie en een empirisch onderzoek meer te weten te komen over verandering in leiderschapsstijlen bij leidinggevenede bij Frontline in Engeland. Mijn focus lag hierbij vooral op het directe effect van de pandemie crisis. Hoe dat de leiders en managers moesten veranderen in hun manier van leiden. en wat hiervan de invloed was op hun teams en de bedrijfscultuur. Dit werd gedaan aan de hand van kwalitatief onderzoek. Ik ben in bestaande, wetenschappelijk onderbouwde literatuur nagegaan of er al onderzoeken bestaan over verandering in leiderschapsptijlen bij organisationele veranderingen. Aan de hand van de gevonden literatuur en een bijkomende empirische studie tracht ik te achterhalen welke factoren een invloed hebben op de stijl van leiding bij leiders.

Graag zou ik mijn promotor, Elien Vandenbroucke, willen bedanken voor de uitstekende ondersteuning gedurende mijn masterproef. Tot slot wil ik ook mijn familie en vrienden bedanken voor de morele steun tijdens het gehele proces.

Ruben Girginol. Universiteit Hasselt
30 mei 2022

Inhoud

1. Abstract

Het doel van deze studie is onderzoeken hoe leiders en managers hun manier van leiden hebben aangepast bij een in het Verenigd Koninkrijk gevestigd bedrijf, genaamd Frontline. Frontline is een marktleider in de distributie van tijdschriften en kranten in de UK. Deze studie heeft als doel te onderzoeken hoe leiders erin slaagden de COVID-19-pandemie te overwinnen en organisatorische verandering te omarmen. De data werd verzameld aan de hand van twaalf diepte-interviews met de leiders van Frontline.

In de literatuur is nog niet veel te vinden over wat leiders kunnen doen tijdens een pandemie. Dit maakt het lastiger om conclusies te trekken over hoe leiders hun stijl kunnen aanpassen of wat ze kunnen veranderen. Daarom kan het huidige onderzoek bijdragen aan toekomstig onderzoek. Kennis hierover is van belang om te kunnen reageren op toekomstige crisissen. Begrijpen waarom mensen bepaalde stijlen en vaardigheden aanpassen om door een crisis heen te komen met hun bedrijf is van belang. Dit onderzoek kan bijdragen aan grootschalige studies, zodat in de toekomst duidelijk is hoe op een dergelijke crisis het beste gereageerd kan worden. In dit onderzoek is de impact van bepaalde stijlen als individu als manager niet meegenomen. De focus lag op hoe de leiders zijn veranderd en wat het effect was op dit bedrijf. Het kan interessant zijn om te zien welk effect elke verandering in leiderschapsstijl heeft op de mensen die bij het bedrijf werken. Daarom werd volgende onderzoeksvraag vooropgesteld: 'Hoe hebben de leiders en managers van Frontline hun leiderschapsstijl moeten aanpassen aan de corona pandemie?'. Vóór COVID-19 kreeg het menselijke aspect wel aandacht, maar het had geen hoge prioriteit. Door COVID-19 zijn veel leiders tot het inzicht gekomen dat luisteren, duidelijk communiceren en aandacht hebben voor de situatie van belang zijn.

Als onderzoeksaanpak en dataverzamelingstechniek bleek de 'critical incident-techniek' geschikt te zijn. De vraag aan de deelnemers om zich te concentreren op gebeurtenissen of incidenten die belangrijk zijn geweest in hun loopbaan en leven was een gestructureerde, maar ook flexibele manier om terug te denken aan gebeurtenissen. De vragen in de interviews gingen over de rol van de werknemers bij Frontline en het werk dat ze deden, de cultuur van de organisatie en de gevolgen van de verandering door COVID-19. De vragen veranderden echter enigszins naarmate de deelnemers vragen stelden over de verhalen die ze vertelden. Naarmate de analyse en verzameling van de gegevens vorderden, zijn doelgerichte steekproeven gebruikt om aanvullende informanten te verkrijgen.

Frontline heeft nog steeds te maken met veel onderhoud van dagdagelijkse taken en dat maakt het toekomst gericht kijken moeilijk. Ook neemt de vraag in de business af door de groeiende online markt. Daardoor kent Frontline veel onzekerheid. Veel managers hebben het gevoel dat ze zich nog steeds in een crisisfase bevinden en niet in een post-crisisfase. Hoewel ze veel geleerd hebben en ervaring hebben opgedaan, gaan ze onzekere tijden tegemoet. Op de vraag hoe ze vonden dat zijzelf als leiders als Frontline-groep communiceerden tijdens COVID-19, waren de meningen verdeeld. De meeste leiders vonden dat Frontline goed reageerde, vooral gezien de omstandigheden die nieuw

en onzeker waren. Veel leidinggevenden vonden dat ze goed werden behandeld en dat de communicatie goed was. Frontline hielp ook de mensen die thuis moesten werken, bijvoorbeeld door laptops, bureaus en bureaustoelen ter beschikking te stellen om thuiswerken comfortabeler te maken. Een aantal managers gaven echter aan te vinden dat Frontline niet voldoende communiceerde, vooral in het begin. Zij vonden dat Frontline vanuit het management beter had kunnen reageren en meer stappen had kunnen ondernemen om het de onzekerheden omtrent hun job voor de mensen aangenamer te maken.

Al met al zijn tijdens de interviews veel stijlen en vaardigheden naar voren gekomen die managers van belang vinden om een bedrijf door een crisis heen te helpen. Eén leiderschapsstijl kwam in het onderzoek vaak naar voren. Dat is de gezaghebbende leiderschapsstijl. Veel leiders vonden deze stijl het moeilijkst of noemden er kenmerken van. Het is van belang dat er in crisistijd iemand is met een luisterend oor, omdat een crisis uitzonderlijk is en een ingrijpend effect heeft op iedereen. Gezaghebbend leiderschap verwijst naar een managementstijl waarbij de leider de touwtjes volledig in handen heeft. Een gezaghebbende leider is iemand die de doelen stelt, de processen bepaalt en toezicht houdt op alle stappen die nodig zijn om die doelen te bereiken, met weinig of geen inbreng van de teamleden. Dat is wat vaak terugkwam zowel in de interviews als in de bijkomende survey. Mensen zochten iemand om mee te praten over hun problemen en zochten geruststelling van leiders. Dit probeert iedere leider te geven.

Ondanks deze vaak hanterende stijl zijn ook veel kenmerken en karaktereigenschappen veranderd. Zo zijn leiders en managers sinds de coronacrisis meer gericht op emotiemanagement, luisteren en mensen op hun gemak stellen. Zij zijn erachter gekomen dat dit een belangrijke vaardigheid en stijl is om in te zetten. Emotionele intelligentie is belangrijker geworden. Dat geldt ook voor duidelijke communicatie en een visie waarin mensen zich kunnen herkennen. Empathisch zijn, geduld hebben en mensen op hun gemak stellen zijn allemaal termen die tijdens het onderzoek naar voren zijn gekomen.

Een andere opmerking is dat de veranderende rol van de leiders en hun visie door de leiders zelf is bepaald. Door het personeel er niet bij te betrekken, is hun perceptie van verandering niet meegenomen. Hoewel managers en leiders over het algemeen hetzelfde antwoord gaven, waren er toch enkele verschillen tussen de managers over bepaalde onderwerpen. Dit is moeilijk te vergelijken, omdat sommige van deze managers in verschillende takken van het bedrijf werkzaam zijn en daardoor een andere visie hebben. Dit maakt het moeilijk om één algemene conclusie te trekken.

Als antwoord op de onderzoeksvraag kan er geconcludeerd worden dat leiders door de crisis een meer gezaghebbende stijl hebben aangenomen. Veel meer empathisch zijn geworden. Ook heeft de cisis er voor gezorgd dat er tussen de leiders en het personeel een veel persoonlijkere band is ontwikkeld. Wat er voor heeft gezorgd dat men elkaar veel meer als team is beginnen aanschouwen. Het negatieve effect is dat leiders soms meer bezig waren met hoe een persoon zich voelde en de behoeften die deze had in plaats van zich te concentreren op het werk, nieuwe doelen en het bedrijf.

Zelfs als de stijl persoonlijker is geworden en mensen zich meer verbonden voelen, is er nog steeds een grote uitdaging om de cultuur levend te houden. De vraag voor leiders is: Hoe houd je onze cultuur in stand en hoe bouw je een gemeenschap op? De leiders van Frontline hebben hiermee geworsteld, want voor een gemeenschap zijn gedeelde ervaringen nodig, maar die waren er niet. Als er echter geen gedeelde ervaring is, ontstaat geen gedeelde cultuur. Aan dit onderzoek zijn ook een aantal beperkingen verbonden. Er werden interviews gehouden met 12 leiders van Frontline. Dit aantal was voldoende voor dit casestudy-onderzoek. Deze steekproefgrootte is echter te klein om globale conclusies te trekken. Om een meer globaal beeld te krijgen, moet er een groter aantal deelnemers en leiders van verschillende bedrijven zijn. De bevindingen van dit onderzoek gelden voor een specifiek bedrijf en een specifieke sector, en niet in het algemeen over hoe bedrijven reageerden of zouden moeten reageren. Deze inzichten zullen in verschillende sectoren anders zijn.

2. Introduction

Many people around the world were infected by the COVID-19 virus. Not only did people suffer greatly, but global economies suffered as well. Many companies were forced to make sudden changes to their ways of operating; this also meant quickly adapting to a situation they had never experienced before in order to not go bankrupt.

During the pandemic, people suddenly had to work from home and switch to online meetings. This led to numerous challenges for managers and leaders, who were used to a certain style of leadership and problem solving, which is what brought them to the positions there are in now. According to Wooten and James (2008), different leadership competencies are needed to manage a crisis at different stages. All of this had to change during the COVID-19 pandemic. Leaders and managers not only had to alter their style of leading but also their way of handling problems, talking to employees, and their adaptation to organizational change. This all had a very big impact on the way of leading and managing a company.

The aim of this research is to find out how leaders and managers adapted their way of leading at Frontline, a company located in the UK with locations in Peterborough and London. Frontline is the market leader in distributing magazines and papers across the entire UK, occupying 70% of the market. Because they are so big in the UK, they also had to deal with COVID-19-related changes in their day-to-day operations. Such a large company is not easy to change, and any organizational changes have a big impact. Change can also be positive. This study aims to examine how leaders managed to overcome the COVID-19 pandemic and embrace organizational change.

3. Literature review

This study looks at the impact of Frontline's leadership style during the COVID-19 crisis. Before investigating this topic, I will present an overview of the different styles of leadership and define what exactly a leader is. Also in relation to COVID-19. I have chosen my literature based on the information that I need for this paper. I tried to find literature that is closely related to this topic and that adds value.

3.1 What is good leadership?

A company's success is attributable to its organizational performance, employee job satisfaction, and employee affective commitment (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Drucker, 1974). Researchers have suggested that good leaders motivate their employees and help them remain competitive by using effective leadership styles (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Luftman, 2004). Therefore, leaders' uses of effective leadership styles promote standards of excellence in the professional development of the members of the organization (LaRue et al., 2006). Effective leadership also involves motivation, management, inspiration, remuneration, and analytical skills (Hurduzeu, 2015). When all these are present, the organization experiences increased employee satisfaction, which positively influences productivity and profits (Hurduzeu, 2015). The positive effect of leadership on organizational performance was measured by Sila and Ebrahimpour (2005) through analysing organizations' human resources, organizational effectiveness, and financial performance. To increase organizational performance, a leader must have the ability to promote creativity and innovation, stimulate their subordinates to challenge their value systems, and improve their performance (Hurduzeu, 2015).

3.2 Types of leadership styles

A leader can be defined as a person who delegates or influences others to act to carry out specified objectives (Mullins, 2007). Today's organizations need effective leaders who understand the complexities of the rapidly changing global environment (Nanjundeswaraswamy & Swamy, 2014). Voon et al. (2011) analysed the influence of leadership styles on employees' job satisfaction considering factors like salaries, job autonomy, job security, and workplace flexibility. Based on these factors, they found that the transformational leadership style has the strongest relationship with job satisfaction.
Fang et al. (2009) posited that leadership style can positively affect organizational commitment and work satisfaction, and in turn, work satisfaction can positively affect organizational commitment and work performance.

3.2.1 Leadership theories

Before discussing the different leadership styles, we will review the work of Sethuraman and Suresh (2014), who discuss five different leadership theories. The aim of this section, is to give an insight into the evolution how leadership is defined through time.

The first of the leadership theories, the "great man theory", states that leaders are born and not made. In other words, one's inherent characteristics will emerge based on need. This theory is based on historical perceptions and was named the "great man theory" as leadership roles were exclusively occupied by males in the past. However, over time, this theory became irrelevant (Cherry, 2012; Sethuraman & Suresh, 2014). The "trait theory" approach was another early leadership theory. This approach focuses on basic leadership traits like physical and personal characteristics, along with the competencies a leader should possess. It is based on the assumption that basic traits are the reason for leadership behaviors that remain consistent in different situations. Similar to the great man theory, this approach states that leaders have characteristics that they are born with and that remain consistent over time (Fleenor, 2006).

"Participative theory" explains the collective decision-making abilities of a leader or the shared influence of the subordinates in decision-making. This leadership style helps motivate team members by considering their input and giving it due importance (Somech, 2006).

The "contingency theory" focuses on factors connected to the environment that might determine the leadership style that would be most appropriate for a particular situation. Various factors include the leadership style, followers, and the situation. Contingency theory also explains the relationship between leadership style and performance of the group during different situations (Sethuraman & Suresh, 2014). This theory is based on decisive elements like the behaviour of the leader.

"Situational theory "emphasizes that leaders will choose the best style of leadership based on the situation and the group to be influenced. But there are three situational dimensions attached to the effectiveness of a leader, namely leader-member relations, which determine the subordinate's loyalty, dependability, and support, task structure, which concerns the subordinate's routine jobs, and position power, where the leader's authority is displayed. All three situational dimensions help leaders maintain situational control (Sethuraman & Suresh, 2014).

The behavioural theory states that leaders are "made and not born," which is the opposite to the great man theory and the behaviour theory states that leadership skills can be learned and developed (Cherry, 2012).

3.2.2 What leadership styles can we derive from the found literature?

Leadership styles vary based on the personality of a leader and their working environment. Situational aspects enable a leader to influence his or her followers (Sethuraman & Suresh, 2014). Leadership styles and contingency theories play a significant role in the literature about leadership (Shaun, 2007). Leaders must understand how their leadership styles influence the performance of their followers. This may have both positive and negative impacts on their followers. For example, if a leader is supportive and consistent or if they are unsupportive and inconsistent. The way a leader approaches their followers can so have a big impact (Sethuraman & Suresh, 2014).

The first leadership theory to be examined is situational leadership style. The situational leadership style was developed by Hersey and Blanchard (1977), who propose that effective leadership depends on the ability of the leader to change their behaviour to suit the situation. The task and relationship behaviours are called directing and supporting behaviours. Hersey and Blanchard (1977) highlighted four different types of leadership behaviour: telling (S1-high directive, low supportive), selling (S2-high directive, high supportive), participating (S3-low directive, high supportive), and delegating (S4-low directive, low supportive).

The transformational style leader wants to achieve results beyond what is normal and set higher corporate goals by inspiring a sense of importance regarding the team's mission, stimulating employees to think innovatively about a problem or task, and placing the group goals over personal self-interest (James, 2005). The transformational leadership style concentrates on the development of followers as well as their needs. Managers with a transformational leadership style concentrate on the growth and development of employees' value systems, inspiration levels, moralities, and abilities (Ismail et al., 2009). According to Bass (1997), transformational leadership aims to "transform" people and organisations in a literal sense, to alter their minds and hearts, expand their vision, insight, and understanding, make their behaviour congruent with their values, and bring about changes which are permanent, self-perpetuating, and momentum-building. According to Bass and Avolio (1990), transformational leaders encourage followers to view problems from new perspectives. They provide support and encouragement, communicate a vision, and stimulate emotion and identification.

The transactional style of leadership in organisations is characterised by an exchange role between managers and subordinates (Jung, 2001). The transactional leadership style is understood to be the exchange of rewards and targets between employees and management (Howell & Avolio, 1993). Bass and Avolio (1990) explained that transactional leaders motivate their subordinates through the use of contingent rewards, corrective actions, and rule enforcement.

The selection of an appropriate leadership style depends on the situation as well as the personality of the leader. Understanding leaders' personality preferences can form the basis of a leadership style that results in a high probability of success. This will also help the leaders to flex their leadership styles appropriately when there is a need. It is found that a leadership style doesn't need to be inborn but can be developed (Sethuraman & Suresh, 2014).

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3.3 Difference between managers and leaders

The concepts of leader and manager are often seen as similar, but there is a clear distinction. The difference between a leader and a manager lies in the difference between efficiency and effectiveness. Where a manager focuses mainly on doing things right, a leader focuses more on doing the right things (Turk, 2007).

Moreover, there is a clear difference between the two in their style of leadership. Managers mainly use a transactional style, while leaders mainly use a transformational style (Deluga, 1988). The transactional leadership style focuses on extrinsic motivation. This includes, for example, monetary rewards. A leader, on the other hand, will focus on intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation will motivate the employee by focusing on recognition and self-development. An intrinsically motivated employee will thus become motivated by the work itself and not by the reward that is attached to it (Davis et al., 1992). "Leadership is the art of making someone else do something that you want because he wants it himself. " (Eisenhower, 1965)

So it is safe to say, there is a difference between a leader and a manager. A manager will have different approaches than leaders.

3.4 Leadership in a changing world

As discussed, the above leaders and managers have a great impact on the firm. A firm is not only affected internally by managers or leaders but also externally.

The world around us is constantly changing, and this is happening at an ever-increasing pace. Bennett and Lemoine (2014) also call this the Volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity world, also known as a 'VUCA world'. VUCA is known as the rapidly changing world in which we as individuals and organisations currently find ourselves and is characterized by a high degree of uncertainty and complexity. The reasons for these uncertainties and complexities, therefore, include not only financial-economic and social developmental reasons, but also social trends, technological trends, and demographic developments that play a major role in the changing movements of countless organisations (Miller, 2012). Although many companies have tried to implement changes, only 30% of the change initiators succeeded in making this change a reality (Beer & Nohria, 2000). Managers and leaders are the main sources of successful implementation of organisational change (Hussain et al., 2018).

Poor leadership is one of the biggest pitfalls for companies wishing to implement organisational change (de Vries, 2016). Leaders play an important role in directing organisational change, developing and communicating a vision, motivating employees to actively participate in the change program, and overcoming resistance and conflict (Stoker, 2005). Organisational change requires effective leaders who apply different styles of leadership in different circumstances (Hartley, 2018).

As discussed above, Hersey et al. (2016) found that one's leadership style needs to be adapted to the situation and the individual in order for the individual to work as effectively as possible. This is also called situational leadership. However, this requires that the leader understands their behaviour and that of their employees so that the situation can be anticipated. According to Hersey et al. (2016), the leader needs to determine which style of leadership suits them best, how many styles of leadership match their personality, and to what extent the leader can adapt.

Through the analysis carried out by Bertoldi et al. (2018), it was possible to identify the characteristics that a manager should have when they are in charge of managing a company. The study showed that a careful analysis of the area in which the change is being made in the external environment could safeguard the endurance of the company over time. The analysed cases confirmed that organisations that have changed in the direction opposite to the change that was taking place in the external environment have failed to maintain their competitive position in the market (Bertoldi et al., 2018). In contrast, companies that understood the exact direction of the environmental change and involved top management in all activities (de Almeida et al., 2016) achieved success regardless of the speed of the process.

An organization's capacity to change depends on a manager's ability to create and communicate a common vision, to participate in the process of change by being willing to share their knowledge, and to promote the organization's development alongside their own personal development (Bertoldi et al., 2018).

As previously investigated by other studies (Ewenstein et al., 2015; Kotter, 1995; Kotter & Schlesinger, 1979; Schiemann, 1992), the research also confirmed the need for a clear vision, an excellent level of communication and knowledge sharing, and the involvement of people at all levels (Pung, 2007) in order to successfully implement change. These factors are essential to avoid the misalignment of goals within the organization (Taylor, 1999)

3.5 Crisis management

Crisis management can be defined as the process where indicators of a potential crisis are obtained and assessed and where necessary measures are taken and applied to ensure minimum loss in a state of crisis (Fener & Cevik, 2015). In this sense, crisis management requires fast and efficient decision-making and immediate correction of deviations. It is crucial that the organization acts quickly and efficiently against any threat to its existence and organisational activities (Akdemir, 1997).

The objectives of crisis management can be stated as the following(Fener & Cevik, 2015): to identify the types of crisis and to inform decision-makers about the crisis process; to enable managers to identify and assess a crisis; to provide managers with several techniques for creating crisis escape plans; to provide the managers with the necessary qualifications for the best possible management of the crisis.

3.5.1 Leadership in crisis

Whether it is maintaining effective communication, building trust, increasing productivity, or protecting brand value, leaders play a huge role during times of crisis (Lockwood, 2005). Therefore, leadership competencies determine the success or failure of crisis management efforts. Lockwood (2005) highlighted the importance of leaders that possess emotional intelligence competencies such as "empathy, self-awareness, persuasion, teamwork skills and the ability to manage relationships" during crisis management (Woolsey, 1986). Wooten and James (2008) further expanded the list of competencies for crisis leadership by including "decision making, communication, creating organisational capabilities, sustaining an effective organisational culture, managing multiple constituencies, and developing human capital".

A leader is born when the need for crisis management arises (Fener & Cevik, 2015). At this moment, leadership emerges to light the path, create resources, guide the way, make decisions, and initiate action (Gultekin, 2002). During states of crisis, people need powerful, self-confident, and accessible leaders (Luecke, 2008). As intra-organisational links become weak in states of crisis and the organisational climax is disrupted, it is necessary to tackle the crisis and motivate staff to do the same (Fener & Cevik, 2015). Leaders overcome states of crisis and restructure the organization so that it can adapt to the changing environmental circumstances (Fener & Cevik, 2015).

We can conclude that leaders have different roles in crisis management. Thus, it is necessary to study leadership characteristics in times of crisis management (Fener & Cevik, 2015).

Groups create leaders. Leadership doesn't reflect personality but the relationship among the group members (Fener & Cevik, 2015). In this regard, leadership becomes a function, such as the work of a postman or policeman, and it addresses the needs of group organization, problem-solving, and guidance.

A person's characteristics make them a leader. Intelligence, a strong personality, and intuition are necessary qualities for leadership (Fener & Cevik, 2015). The assignment of power is not sufficient to become a leader. A leader should not merely have the power but also the ability to use that power (Fener & Cevik, 2015). Being a leader is not the same as being a manager, and in states of crisis, an organization needs a leader more than a manager. Whereas management focuses on imitation and continuity of the present, leadership focuses on creativity, harmony, and agility (Fener & Cevik, 2015). Whereas a manager looks at the final total line of the end-of-period profit-loss chart, a leader also looks at the horizon line. Whereas a manager focuses on systems, supervisions, processes, policies, and structure, a leader focuses on reliability and human relations (Fener & Cevik, 2015). "Leadership" comes first among the achievement criteria in crisis management. To be called a leader, a person must be able to unite and inspire others; they leave a legacy and create a difference (Fener & Cevik, 2015). Having a positive outlook and a message to deliver are two prerequisites of leadership. Leaders create a picture for the future with their cognitive and intellectual experiences. This is their vision. Leaders follow their own messages, and the people around them follow the leaders (Tutar, 2004).

Leadership is also associated with greater levels of positive affect, which leads to higher resilience among team members in a crisis. It is therefore understood that the personality of the leader, together with their behaviour, is of greater importance than, for example, assessing information and making decisions under conditions of extraordinary stress (Tokakis et al., 2019). The leaders that comprehend the importance of emotional intelligence are in a position to identify the needs of their subordinates, to actually express their interests, to reflect on changes in their emotional state, and to work collectively to achieve the targets set (Polychroniou, 2009; Rahim et al., 2002) by handling conflicts (Tokakis et al., 2019). Even in a crisis where lives are at stake, positive emotions can emerge and have important outcomes for individuals and teams (Sommer et al., 2016).

For the above reasons, teamwork is very important, as it creates a tendency among staff to work in cooperation against states of crisis (Barton, 2001). The strategies required for crisis management are identified by the crisis management team, which consists of people who were trained to address the risks of crisis. It is necessary to set up a crisis control centre, an urgent information centre, to manage the team from a single location (Tutar, 2004).

Crisis environments require immediate decisions and action (Tutar, 2004). Consequently, crisis management requires leaders with a vision. In the modern world, leader management includes foresight for the future, identification of a realistic vision, objectives for the future of the organization, and motivating people to realize these. Leaders with foresight have a vision and can assess the potential of their staff and persuade them that they can do better than in the past (Tutar, 2004). Thus, leader managers who have vision are able to put this vision into action as soon as they perceive the indicators of crisis and are able to guide the staff and team accordingly. The most significant burden regarding crisis management is the fact that some managers tend to stick to regulations. As managers are guided by actions and operations recommended in protocols, they cannot take immediate decisions in unexpected events.

This adversely affects the management of the organization (Fener & Cevik, 2015). Conversely, leader managers should be able to make immediate decisions when needed. According to Fener and Cevik (2015), crisis management is the process wherein the organization seeks to take and apply necessary precautions to overcome a state of crisis with minimum loss.

3.5.2 Which leadership skills and styles are now most important?

A review of the literature identifies numerous and diverse leadership-related skills purported to be important during times of crisis. These include integrity, intelligence, charisma, vision, communication, authenticity, influence, managing emotions, self-awareness, participative decision-making, and effective sense-making skills (Bolman & Deal, 1997; Burnett, 2002; Furst & Reeves, 2008; Garcia, 2006; Madera & Smith, 2009; Schoenberg, 2005; Weick, 1988).

Effective leadership is required to manage crises and successfully transition the organization into recovery (Bolman & Deal, 1997; Burnett, 2002; James et al., 2011; Pearson & Mitroff, 1993; Pearson & Clair, 1998). James et al. (2011) specifically call for research with a positive psychology slant, whereby crises are framed as opportunities rather than problems. A close review of the existing literature suggests there is also a lack of clarity regarding effective leadership practices and the expectations that employees have of their leaders in crisis and non-crisis contexts. The results of several studies suggest that an agentic or authoritative leadership style is typically preferred in the presence of crises and threats (Gartzia et al., 2012). This leadership style is able to coordinate efforts in one direction, as identified by the leader (Mulder et al., 1986). Research has suggested that as threats become overwhelming, individuals in a group expect leaders to centralize authority and take action (Gladstein & Reilly, 1985; Hannah et al., 2009; Isenberg, 1981). Likewise, research by Mulder and colleagues (Mulder et al., 1971;Mulder et al., 1986) suggests that decision-making during times of crisis should not be shared and that a powerful type of leadership is preferred by direct reports and is evaluated more favorably by leaders' superiors. Results also suggest that more power and less open consultation is typically used in crisis versus non-crisis situations (Mulder et al., 1986). In addition, a study by Van Wart and Kapucu (2011) explored leadership competencies during times of catastrophic crises. In this context, strong, decisive leadership, characterized by self-confidence, decisiveness, analytic ability, willingness to assume responsibility, and the ability to delegate, was preferred over consultative and transformational competencies (i.e., the need for achievement, consultation, and personal development). However, recent literature suggests that the above findings may not tell the whole story. For example, research by Ryan et al. (2011) suggests that there is a tendency for masculine traits to be seen as more desirable when crisis management tasks (such as acting as a spokesperson or improving company performance) are required. However, there is a preference for more feminine traits when a manager is required to manage people through a crisis.

Bass et al. (2008) have suggested that effective leaders use a transactional style of leadership during times of threat to articulate expectations of what must be accomplished. However, they further state that a transformational style of leadership may improve performance because a transformational leader demonstrates care for the welfare of their followers and inspires others by communicating their role in the larger mission (Hannah et al., 2009).

As the above literature suggests, desired leadership practices in a crisis context are complex and nuanced. It does not appear possible or sufficient to suggest that one leadership style or another (e.g., agentic or communal/transactional, or transformational) is ideal across crisis contexts (Haddon et al., 2015).

3.5.3 Phases in a crisis

According to Wooten and James (2008), different leadership competencies are needed to manage a crisis at different stages (Wooten & James, 2008). Crisis management includes all activities applied in a planned, systematic, and rational way to eliminate the state defined as a crisis (Fener & Cevik, 2015). Its systematicity enables the initiation of a step-by-step decision-making process and the formation of a team to apply these decisions and make new decisions according to the results of the practice. Three types of management processes are generally used to overcome crises inorganizations: Pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis management. In the pre-crisis process, the management aims to perceive the indicators of crisis and transform crisis conditions into achievements. Crisis management, which is the type of management used during the actual state of crisis, is the stage where a potential state of crisis is predicted and necessary precautions are taken to avoid crisis (Fener & Cevik, 2015). When the state of crisis is over, the post-crisis process begins. At this point, leader managers find appropriate solutions that are adapted to changes and bring new dimensions to their activities and strategies (Fener & Cevik, 2015).

3.5.3.1 Pre-crisis phase

The pre-crisis phase includes the signal detection of a forthcoming crisis, crisis preparation, and crisis prevention. Signal detection during the pre-crisis period can have a huge impact on crisis management initiatives and outcomes (Bundy et al., 2016). One of the most challenging tasks at this stage is to filter out the right signals from the wrong ones (Pearson & Clair, 1998). Acquiring appropriate information and knowledge can help organisations discover warning signs promptly and effectively. During an internal crisis, it can be proposed that the most appropriate culture for an organization would be internally focused with low flexibility (Bhaduri, 2019). This would help organisations to detect signals promptly and help them to enact correct steps to prevent crises from occurring due to internal factors. On the other hand, during times of external crisis, an organisational culture that is externally focused with high flexibility would easily detect signs of crisis and initiate steps to curb the effects of the crisis (Bhaduri, 2019).

Numerous studies suggest that high-reliability organisations are more capable of preventing crises. Other factors that may influence the likelihood of a crisis occurring include organisational culture and structure. It can be assumed that the cultural and structural factors increasing the likelihood of a crisis also make it more difficult to reliably organize (Bundy et al., 2016). Both Barton (2001) and Coombs and Holladay (2006) posit that organisations are better able to handle crises when they (1) have a crisis management plan that is updated at least annually, (2) have a designated crisis management team, (3) conduct exercises to test the plans and teams at least annually, and (4) pre-draft some crisis messages.

3.5.3.2 Crisis phase

After the pre-crisis phase, the company enters into the crisis phase. An organization may not know that it is involved in a crisis (Kamer, 1996) and may only identify the real situation when those who make decisions assess that it is a crisis (Pauchant & Mitroff, 1992). A crisis management team (CMT) is a crucial intersection of vast and complex intergovernmental and inter-organisational networks that are called to respond to a crisis (Boin et al., 2016; Wester, 2011).

The effectiveness of a CMT depends on the abilities of its members to perform tasks such as situation assessment, communication, and team-working (Flin, 1996). Coombs, Coombs and Holladay (2006) also support that the members of a CMT must be capable of making decisions. Since crisis management is a decision-making process (Fink & Association, 1986; O'Connor, 1985; Olaniran & Williams, 2004), human factors and team processes play a key role in improving the response speed, accuracy, and efficiency of group members (Jehn & Techakesari, 2014).

Crises have a heavy emotional toll on both leaders and other organisational stakeholders, and thus, leaders must gain knowledge regarding how to effectively and strategically manage negative emotions (e.g., anger, anxiety, fear) that arise during crises. During times of crisis, two-way communication is essential (Bhaduri, 2019). The importance of leaders listening and being aware of the emotional toll while also effectively disseminating information was emphasized (Haddon et al., 2015). Crisis management team leaders' beliefs, values, and emotional intelligence competencies are of critical importance to the overall style of leadership that they adopt (Tokakis et al., 2019).

A leader, therefore, should combine the ability to assess the information and make the right decisions during a crisis while considering the time limitations and difficult conditions (Halverson et al., 2004; Quarantelli, 1988). Emotional management and regulation theories provide a useful framework for understanding how leaders can manage and regulate employees', stakeholders', and their own emotions to achieve positive outcomes during crises (Bavik et al., 2021). For example, crisis leadership scholars may look to existing (Bavik et al., 2021).

3.5.3.3 Post-crisis phase.

Eventually, a firm will enter into a post-crisis phase, which includes recovery and learning (Bhaduri, 2019). This process has two aspects: First, the emergency state is terminated, and the organization begins to operate under normal conditions. Second, reporting takes place as a strategic option. Both are distinguishable and interrelated (Boin et al., 2016). Coombs and Holladay (2006) recommend that every crisis management exercise be carefully dissected as a learning experience.

Past events indicate that organisations have failed to detect the right signals or implement appropriate preventive measures during times of crisis. As a result, crisis events have devastated business operations in the past. Wooten and James (2008) suggested that "decision-making" and "communication" are the most important leadership competencies at this stage. Additionally, communication is a group activity that involves not only leaders but also organisational members at all levels. Therefore, if the organization has a strong cultural practice of communication among members in the form of behaviours and norms, then damage containment may be managed effectively. "Organisational resiliency" and "acting with integrity" can help organisations spring back to their pre-crisis stage with the utmost efficiency (Wooten & James, 2008).

Post-crisis learning is the most important phase of crisis management. At this time, members must have an open mind to reflect on their actions and learn from the crisis event. This is also the time when the organization must acknowledge a crisis situation as an opportunity rather than a threat for consistent future improvements (James et al., 2011; Wang, 2008; Woolsey, 1986). Adopting appropriate cultural practices in the form of behaviours, norms, beliefs, and artefacts can assist leaders in transforming a crisis into a favourable situation. In this sense, learning from a crisis situation is not a random activity but a manifestation of a supportive organisational culture (values, knowledge, and practices) that enables leaders to pull the organization up from any grave situation. One of the leadership competencies critical to this stage is "learning orientation" (Wooten & James, 2008). Whether during an internal or external crisis, an internally focused organisational culture with high flexibility might work best. Therefore, a transformational leader is the most fitting in this case (Bhaduri, 2019).

3.5.4 Lessons from the crisis and COVID-19

An organization should seek ways to improve, prevent, prepare, and respond to crises. If organisational leaders fail to detect the significant threats associated with crises and act swiftly in addressing the immediate risks, these crises may quickly worsen, threatening the survival of organisations and irreversibly impacting stakeholders. Given the perceived magnitude and urgency of crises, leaders often confront significant time pressure, risk, and uncertainty in their decision-making (Bavik et al., 2021).

Post-crisis research from the internal perspective shows that learning from a crisis is possible, subject to conditions that may influence the types of lessons learned and the degree to which lessons are internalized (Bundy et al., 2016). Leaders face a serious threat to fundamental structures, values, and norms of a system when they must make vital decisions under time constraints and uncertain conditions (Mann & Janis, 1983; Tjosvold, 1984). The management of a crisis is vital, as it directly affects the long-term future of the social system (Rosenthal et al., 2001). Leaders also play a strategic role during and in the immediate aftermath of crises and disasters (Jong et al., 2016).

Organisational leaders often perform diverse roles in shaping their organisations' strategic decisions, policies, negotiations, and interactions with different stakeholders (Samimi et al., 2020). The importance of varied leadership roles and processes may change due to the evolving demands of various stakeholders throughout the different phases of a crisis (Tokakis et al., 2019).

Importantly, scholars have recognized the potential for crisis events to become turning points for positive changes by creating opportunities when crises are well managed (James et al., 2011). For instance, the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly disrupted the normal functioning of business operations and individuals' lives, causing a sudden decline in customer orders and revenues in some businesses and increasing the risk of bankruptcy and the need to cater to social distancing rules. At the same time, the pandemic also offers opportunities for new ventures to address novel demands that have emerged in the market and for organisations to demonstrate their adaptability and positive aspects to stakeholders (Donthu & Gustafsson, 2020; Kniffin et al., 2021).

3.6 Further investigation

Having reviewed the literature surrounding this research, we now turn to real-world examples. It is important to investigate practical events, as crises can potentially engender detrimental impact and heavy emotional toll on different stakeholders and hence create conflicting demands on organisations (Bundy et al., 2016; Pillai & Meindl, 1998). From the literature, it is known that leaders and managers have different styles of leading, but that both must be able to adapt to different situations. According to Wooten and James (2008), different leadership competencies are needed to manage a crisis at different stages (Wooten & James, 2008). In this further research, I try to find out how leaders adapt their style to an unprecedented situation, in this case COVID. In existing literature, several styles have already been described as well suited to certain change. But in connection with COVID, there have been no concrete studies yet. My case study on Frontline can add value to this.

4 Research methodology

This research study follows the constructivist ground theory based on the article by Murphy and Lambrechts (2015), who adopt a constructivist grounded theory approach to qualitative research (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007; Fendt & Sachs, 2008). Qualitative research is relevant to describe or explain social phenomena "from the inside" (Gibbs, 2007), especially when partial or inadequate theories exist or when existing theories do not adequately capture the complexity of the phenomena (Creswell, 2007). As commonly argued (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007; McCreaddie & Payne, 2010), grounded theory is an effective research strategy to study phenomena that have been the subject of relatively little research; in this case, Frontline's style of leadership during COVID-19. As an approach, grounded theory allows for the development of a theory that is grounded in data that are systemically and simultaneously gathered and analyzed (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). Indeed, grounded theory "helps . . . to come skin close to the lived experience and incidents of the management world and make sense of them" (Fendt & Sachs, 2008). Grounded theory researchers are interested in patterns of action and interaction between various types of social units. Using a case study research approach (Eisenhardt, 1989; Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Yin, 2009), each social unit in this study was a member of the Frontline company.

According to Yin (2009), case studies recognize patterns of relationships among constructs both within and across cases. Furthermore, as case studies may demand theoretical or purposeful sampling (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2009), they may be appropriate for understanding and extending the relationships between constructs. Moreover, a qualitative approach is used because the research addresses soft issues that are not amenable to quantification and searches for the meanings that lie behind actions, focusing on understanding rather than measuring (Nordqvist et al., 2009; Silverman, 2015).

In line with the guidelines for grounded theory (Charmaz et al., 1995; Corbin & Strauss, 1990) and for building theory from case study research (Eisenhardt, 1989), the sampling for this study proceeded on theoretical grounds. Because the parties of interest are employees of Frontline, the sample used for this study was purposefully selected using people who work for the company. While an original sample of five people was selected in line with Eisenhardt (1989), who claims that it can be difficult to generate a theory with fewer than four cases, this sampling was later extended to twelve cases, including Frontline directing managers, regional managers, and most of the top management team. The number of twelve participants was not predetermined but evolved with the need to collect more data. Table 1 provides a profile of the participants (see Appendix table 1 for the interview protocol). All participants are named, as all gave permission for the release of their names during their interviews. All business names have also been added to easily determine which manager works for which company.

For this paper in particular, the critical incident technique has been used to analyse the behaviours associated with leadership and COVID-19. The research population was based in London and consisted of all managers and leaders employed with the Frontline group. A face-to-face interview was conducted with 12 managers and leaders.

The Frontline group is the mother firm of four large firms: Seymour, Mags Direct, GKM, and R2RT. Frontline is the Uk's leading magazine sales, marketing and distribution company. Frontline is an innovator in the supply of magazines, redefining copy management, retail marketing, analysis and reporting, supply chain fulfilment, product placement, brand activation and digital services. Interviews typically lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. I recorded the interviews and had them professionally transcribed. Interview questions broadly focused on employees' roles at Frontline, the organization's culture (which emphasized creativity), and the consequences of the organization's growth. However, the questions changed somewhat as my informants guided my inquiries through the stories they told (Charmaz, 2006). Table 1a contains an overview of the interview data. I began by selecting accessible top managers who could provide an overview of the organization, as well as field employees located in stores close to where I was based (Sonenshein, 2012). From these initial interviews, I began to learn about the organization's culture and the role of creativity in its operations. Next, I interviewed informants in all key departments of the organization to understand whether the emerging patterns were isolated to certain groups. As my data collection and analysis unfolded, I used purposeful sampling to seek out additional interviewees (Glaser & Strauss, 2017). Direction for the additional sampling was provided through an analysis of the existing data collected. I engaged in constant comparison of data across participants while at the same time allowing my emerging analysis to benefit from my interpretations (Charmaz, 2006).

As stated above, the analysis began simultaneously with the data collection process. This procedure is in line with grounded theory principles (Charmaz et al., 1995; Corbin & Strauss, 1990), which advocate for data collection and analysis as interrelated processes. The principle of constant comparison was also adhered to. Each participant interview guided the next interview, as each participant's lived experience was compared to the previous and following participants.

I was particularly interested in whether patterns from my initial interviews would remain consistent across all the people I interviewed. Finally, as I began to develop provisional models of the data, I used theoretical sampling to seek out cases that could fill in any remaining blanks and refine my provisional ideas (Bolman & Deal, 1997). This led me to visit several informants again as well as to seek out new informants who might shed light on my findings.

In-depth qualitative interviewing was the main data collection method employed in this study. The data were collected over the course of six weeks between November 2021 and December 2021. The critical incident technique (CIT) was used as a means of focusing the interviews. This technique proved to be highly appropriate as a research approach and data collection technique. Asking the participants to focus on events or incidents that were significant in their careers and lives provided them with a structured yet flexible means of recalling retrospective events. Chell (1998) refers to this process as providing participants with a 'hook' upon which they 'hang' their accounts and views as a means of enhancing the validity of retrospective accounts. In the CIT, dialogue occurs between the researcher and the participant. Butterfield et al. (2005) consider the criterion for the accuracy of retrospective self-reporting and highlight that Flanagan (1954) and later Woolsey (1986) proposed that if the information provided is full, clear, and detailed, it is thought to be accurate.

The quality of the incidents recounted by participants is important. For this research, each participant was asked to "describe key learning points/incidents and influences in your life and career to date." Because the CIT, as proposed by Flanagan (1954), focuses on a particular activity, the researchers asked participants to focus on key incidents and influences in their leadership careers. Both focused on the interview (from the perspectives of the researchers and the participant) and provided data that could be used later as a validation tool. While CIT is seen as a flexible technique, it is recommended that the technique be explained to the participant (Butterfield et al., 2005). As such, the technique was fully explained to all participants at the onset of each interview

My initial intention was to observe employees working in Frontline's Peterborough and London offices. During the observation, I was also completing an internship at Frontline, which allowed me to come in contact with a lot of people at the organization. Not only was I able to observe Frontline employees, but I was also able to work with them. I was viewed as a part of the team, so my role shifted to that of a participant-observer—an experience that helped me understand that employees did not treat resources as fixed entities but instead as malleable objects (Feldman, 2004). During my observations as both a researcher and a participant, I also took notes, which I wrote out each evening after leaving a research site (Emerson et al., 1995).

Each case was individually analysed several times during the coding process so that I could "become intimately familiar with each case as a standalone entity" (Eisenhardt, 1989; Stake, 2003). Case analyses required the researchers to write up detailed stories of each individual case (Yin, 2009). While these stories are merely descriptive, Pettigrew (1990) claims that they are central to the generation of theoretical insights.

The cross-case analysis resulted in the researchers searching for patterns, which were performed in pairs, as suggested by Eisenhardt (1989), and according to family group and employment status. This process resulted in the emergence of categories, which will be further described below. Because the CIT was used, the researchers also analysed critical incidents both within and across cases. To be considered critical, these incidents had to be significant among the managers and leaders of Frontline. As the researchers maintained contact with participants via email and telephone, these incidents were verified by participants as significant during the post-interview phase of the research. The next section will detail the coding process that took place during the data collection and the data analysis phases.

5. Findings

This study explored how leaders of Frontline adapted their leadership style in response to the COVID-19 crisis. This chapter first examines the organisational changes which Frontline faced. I then look at what skills were needed in the context of this change. This chapter subsequently explores the changes in leadership style due to COVID-19, including the skills required. This chapter concludes by analysing the overall picture of how COVID-19 affected the participants' leadership styles, the overall reaction of the company, and its future outlook.

5.1 Changes at Frontline

As previously noted, Frontline is a very large company with locations throughout England. Before COVID-19, Frontline had already faced significant organisational change within the company. In 2013, a change in management led to organisational restructuring, which resulted in many employees being let go. When asked about the biggest changes at Frontline, all of the interviewees noted the organisational changes in 2013 and changes during COVID-19 in 2020.

COVID-19 led to significant structural change at Frontline, which management already had some experience with. In 2013, Frontline was plagued by a lack of results and efficiency. Therefore, when Frank Straetmans was appointed as CEO, a major restructuring was introduced in the company. This organisational change was business-related and was not personal. The changes were strictly focused on numbers and improving company performance. The COO, Mark, stated that during the restructuring, almost all of the directors left the company, and the leadership team changed when Frank joined the company. Mark was promoted to the board of directors, and managing directors Nick and Phil joined at this time. Major changes occurred both among long-term employees at the top and also among junior employees. *According to Phil, "We created this new team and then went on a cultural change journey."* The Group Information Service Director, Greg, also stated that before the COVID-19 crisis, every Frontline leader was focused on results. As Frontline is not in an easy business to run, the company's intention is to constantly think ahead and pursue new innovations. The leaders of various teams reflected on a task-focused bond among employees. In their view, Frontline has always had a positive, everyone-knows-everyone culture. However, according to Frank, there was never any real in-depth knowledge of how employees were really doing. Frank was eager to change this culture because he is a very people-focused leader, though such change takes much time and effort. Nevertheless, as the CEO stated, *"Frontline is very good at responding to the practical side of things."*

5.2 Skills needed for the first organisational change

All of the managers and leaders provided insights on what they thought were the skills needed for the cultural change in 2013 brought about by new leadership. As many managers already had some experience with this kind of situation, some managers were more ruthless than others.

The first idea mentioned in the interview with the account manager, Susan, was the need to be very clear in communication with employees. For this purpose, having good people skills was important. Category manager Paula also mentioned that during the time of the restructure, it was crucial to have resilience and to show empathy. However, at the same time, leaders needed to maintain a level of distance, because employees needed to feel that they were treated equally and fairly. One very important skill that Paula mentioned was being authentic.

Managing director Chris also noted the importance of being authentic and not getting overly personal. He highlighted that during the restructuring, it was key for leaders to have confidence in their vision. Although the short term might feel painful, one must be confident that things will work out in the long term. This is the best thing a leader can do for their team during a transition, because the change that leaders seek can create a stronger business. It is therefore important for a leader to have the confidence to keep going, especially in challenging times, to have the vision that there will be a positive end.

The better the information leaders provide to their employees, the more trust they build and the more that employees will support change. Greg also emphasised that it was critical for leaders to be clear about the outcome they sought to create. The CEO, Frank, added that the two most important words around organisational change that appeared during every interview were clarity and honesty.

5.3 Changes in tasks and skills due to COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic was a completely unexpected phenomenon, and the change it triggered was enormous. No manager or leader had ever experienced a similar event; therefore, they did not know how to react. In the beginning, there was a great deal of chaos at Frontline. More than 300 people had to work from home, and the normal routine of the office was no longer in place. This was not merely an organisational change, but rather a change in the entire identity and functioning of the organisation. This was also the moment when Frontline ultimately found itself in a crisis. Nobody knew what the future would bring. Managers and leaders could no longer make physical calls, logistics were complicated or halted, and the hospitality industry and the tourism sector, which were major customers of Frontline, were falling apart. The result was high demands upon leaders and managers.

The remainder of this section provides an overview of the process that the managers and leaders had to go undergo, both on an operational and personal level. Moreover, the following sub-sections address the skills and tasks they were required to handle.

5.3.1 Empathy and authenticity

In terms of dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic, empathy and authenticity were a necessity, but leaders and managers also had to listen more, taking on a role similar to that of a counsellor. According to the category manager Paula, *"You don't want a parent-child relationship between your manager and employee basically one adult to adult, but everybody reverted to [a] kind of childlike status when they hadn't before, and they needed me to tell [them] everything was going to be*

alright." Many managers were asked questions that had nothing to do with work. For Paula, this was the biggest change: *"people's reliance on me to make them feel better during the COVID crisis".* Another interesting finding was the fact that managers also became more tolerant than they previously were. They became, according to Frank, *"softer, and I don't mean that in a negative way, but, you know, just more accepting of excuses and open [to] 'excuse me, excuse me for not being able to deliver stuff.'"* Prior to the pandemic, the leaders at Frontline were generally ruthless and expected their teams to deliver to expectations. Thus, managers became 'softer' in a way, accepting excuses more then they wanted.

However, certain managers also became more directive. Mark, for example, felt that it was very important to make quick decisions and get on with the job. He stated that sometimes leaders could take this responsibility too far because they felt under pressure: *"...but I think, when it's really in a difficult place, you need to be quickly making decisions, and hence you're becoming more directive."* Therefore, there was variation between certain leaders and their changes in skills. Some, like the CEO and Paula, became softer in order to help their teams and wanted to foster feelings of safety and reassurance. Yet others, like Mark, became more directive. Between the leaders, there were differing opinions regarding the best approach to leading.

5.3.2 Personal skills with the team

Another significant change was that during the restructure, stakeholders as in the managers and leaders, were very focused on the job and the aspects that were changing in the role. In the early beginning of the lockdown nobody talked about what was going on at home, despite the fact that COVID-19 triggered immense personal changes. Most of Frontline's team members have young families; therefore, many employees were home-schooling. Half were furloughed. Some lived on their own. They all had different reasons why they were struggling, and they all wanted help. Frank stated, *"I don't even know if that would happen again in a work environment or any other organisational change or [if] anything that huge would require that much compassion, because you always show compassion, but just that support, that emotional support is so important."* Paula also stated that the people side of things was new and overwhelming

For managing director Phill, the difference with COVID-19 changes was that they were much more personal. People needed more connection, more time, more caring. *"That's been exhausting to cope with because the amount of time I've had to invest into people's kind of mental health and emotional state has been off the chart compared to where we were putting together. And that's not just about them, it's about that family, [it's] not just about kids, it's about, if they've got grandparents or parents who were ill and what sort of stuff; the stress of that comparison."* This statement indicates that the job became less important. People started to ask questions on the job that had nothing to do with the work at Frontline. Managers and leaders consequently had more work on top of the normal work, because they also had the task of comforting their teams and helping them with personal issues.

Another momentous change that Frontline had to face was the furlough scheme, especially with the focus on obtaining government support. Those who were on furlough felt vulnerable because they wondered what would happen to the business without them. Those who were not on furlough were forced to absorb the workload from those that were, creating emotional stress for both parties.

Phil stated that the biggest challenge for him was that he furloughed more employees proportionally than anyone else. Once this became transparent, some employees on his team questioned whether he was being more harsh than other directors. Here again, different managers had different visons on how they should approach their team. Although the CEO and management all had the same guidelines, there were still a lot of differences in approaches between managers and their teams.

5.3.3 Emotional intelligence

Emotional intelligence also became more critical for leaders at Frontline during the pandemic. Frontline had to switch its management team to online meetings. As a result, employees were suddenly able to view each other in their living spaces. In addition, many more people began discussing non-work-related tasks. Frontline organised game nights and weekly chat sessions to improve employees' sense of well-being, as management noticed that people needed some form of social gatherings. The managers who possessed more emotional intelligence understood the needs of their team more quickly than their less emotionally intelligent peers. The managers who grasped the importance of emotional intelligence also identified the needs of their teams to express their interests and to work collectively to achieve the targets set by handling conflicts. In this way those teams and managers handled certain situation better and even thrived during the COVID pandemic, because they felt more like a team.

The CEO, Frank, shared that in order to set a good example, he told his employees that he had to leave a meeting to tend to his children, thereby demonstrating that it was okay to do other tasks sometimes. Because the COVID-19 situation made it very difficult to multitask, managers and supervisors were also more forgiving of employees who could not finish tasks on time. In summary, far greater attention was paid to emotional intelligence.

5.4 Changes in leadership style due to COVID-19

A clear difference in leadership style during COVID-19 was the new emphasis on listening and more of a coaching style . As an example, Paula acknowledged that she was the normally the person who simply told employees what they needed to do, and off they went. However, during the pandemic, managers had to deal with tears during lockdown and frustrations. They needed to provide a space for people to talk and listen. Conversations were less task-focussed and more empathetic and people-focussed.

In addition, managers and leaders also learned to be authentic. Managers stated that it was critical that people knew what their values were and what they stood for. There could be no ambiguity; people had to understand why certain decision were made by the management and why the leaders

and managers expected certain behaviours from their team. Thus, in the use of a certain style or approach, managers had to share their values and demonstrate authenticity towards their team. In line with this idea, Paula stated, *"I think you need a high level of emotional intelligence and good resilience, and you need the empathy towards your team."* A change in leadership style or approach is good, but is has to be communicated very clearly and with attention towards the team.

The managers of Frontline also learned to have less of a facade, a veneer between their lives and what they would allow their team to know about them, but also to other people in the management team. Managers had to be human and vulnerable at work, whereas before they felt that that was not a leader's role to do that.

In line with having less of a façade, another change in style was having a more open communication approach. One reason for this change was the fact that people were suddenly in each other's homes via Teams. The employees at Frontline saw each other's families and kids; they therefore spoke more about their problems and private lives.

What also came forward in the interviews was the role of vision and bravery. In order for a good business to survive, a manager needs vision and bravery and leader with good communication. However, these qualities do not guarantee success on their own. Before Frank came in as a CEO, there were previous leaders with vision and bravery, but they did not have the people skills, so they did not bring people along with them. When Frank arrived and put energy into the business, there was a visible change. Again, communication was key. Frank was very clear on what he wanted, he was very brave, and he had creative flair. During the pandemic, managers also had to embody these characteristics with their teams. They always helped their teams by communicating very openly, with the right vision. It became more necessary than ever to inspire and motivate people. It became clear in the interviews that leaders had to truly understand people and to have a supportive leadership style to really help people through the tough times. A coaching style was therefore appropriate, because employees needed better direction.

Although there were two manager who adapted new styles, there were also managers who did not change their style. These managers changed only aspects about their leadership style, but not the style itself. An example was the account manager*: "I think probably the only thing that I probably dialled up a little bit more with even more care. I'd always been a very caring, supportive manager. Anyway, that was a natural style of my leadership. But I think I probably dialled back a little bit more because I was conscious whether people were okay."*

Greg similarly articulated: "*I think my only thing I'd change would be more deliberate about staying in touch with people because I tend to lead people to get on and do their own thing anyway. I'm not a micromanager person. So we set broad directions and I just leave to get on with it. If I step things, I'll come and talk to me. But actually, I found that it was better to step forward in the COVID war and spend more proactive time in communication with them because they just you need to pick up some time if they know the cues you need to pick up, sometimes where people are struggling. And so my style probably went to more of involvement and less of in involvement."*

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5.5 Positive and negative effects of changes due to COVID

Because the impact of COVID was so immense, it is interesting to note the positive and negative effects on the organisation. This research therefore examined the effects on the people and company of the new styles and skills that the managers and leaders used. Every manager had a different view on this topic, which accounted for positive effects as well as negative effects.

5.5.1 Positive effects

This sub-section explores the positive effects on management and the company more broadly.

The first significant positive effect was that people completed more work. Because of the quick reaction of the company, Frontline performed well in terms of overall approach. As a result of good communication and the emotional intelligence of managers and leaders, there was a lot of flexibility and adaptability in terms of people helping to get things done that needed to get done without having to undergo dramatic change.

Employee interactions also became much more personal as employees saw into each other's kitchens and living rooms and witnessed their children's habits. People started to talk more about their personal lives. Many managers reported that the first minutes of a meeting, or sometimes the entire meeting, would involve a discussion of how people were doing, because that is what people needed. Many managers said that this approach was eye-opening for them, because it did not fit their normal style. They had never had such personal workplace relationships or and never offered much information about their own personal life and wellbeing. Employees also became much closer because everyone was experiencing the crisis together. People collaborated more than before, and everyone felt much more connected because of this personal bond, leading some teams to outperform their previous standard and work together more smoothly.

One of the things that the managers appreciated was that although everybody was working from home, they continued their jobs without any hesitation. For some tasks, people could even get more done by working alone undisturbed. Phil shared, *"One of the things I'm really proud about is that because everyone's working at home in isolation, even without me initiating some stuff, they've just cracked on with the job."* This continuity was achieved because everybody felt themselves in the same positions. They wanted to get things done and keep going. Of course, this was not the case for everyone. Some people had a hard time and did not cope well with working from home. However, because of the care of the managers, such cases were given extensive attention.

A further positive effect was that people started working together more as a team, because everyone was in the same situation. People felt more like a coherent group and exhibited more understanding for each other. Susan reported that she felt more linked with her team, and she talked more about what was actually happening in her personal life as well. Some areas of work also became more efficient because everything began to go through teams.

Furthermore, managers became more flexible, taking on the outlook that as long as work was done, people could plan their own day. This did not have an immediate negative effect on the results.

Since Frank became the CEO at Frontline, the company culture has been very positive. In general, the managers had to learn how to be much more empathetic. During the pandemic, people had far more problems and questions than usual. Leadership also had to become much more flexible. Interpersonal management and emotional intelligence became much more important qualities for Frontline leaders, receiving far greater attention. Moreover, employees today have more of a connection than before. Business operations are more people-centred. How people feel, what they think, and their opinions have become more important. When the CEO walks around the office, he chats with employees and asks them how they are doing. Managers and HR workers also do the same.

5.5.2 Negative effects

In the context of this study, it is also important to look at the negative effects that COVID has brought with it. The changes in leadership style and approach also led to some negative impacts.

The first significant negative effect that managers noticed was that it was really difficult to not have face-to-face communication. Many managers struggled with losing the ability to read the mood of people. For many leaders and managers, this created a huge burden beyond their normal daily tasks.

In addition, people suddenly started to worry about what they had to do and how they had to work. Managers consequently had to adopt a kind of parenting role, as people became very insecure and had many questions.

Another negative effect that became clear throughout the interviews was that people wanted to know what was going to happen in the future. There was a lot of uncertainty and people were scared to lose their jobs. The company was not able to alleviate these concerns. Phil stated that even if he knew or the company knew what was going to happen in the short term, he would not know how to bring it up to the team because it was outside of the control of the leaders.

One of the most serious downsides of the COVID-19 situation from a leadership perspective was that the focus for 18 months was on crisis management, at the expense of leadership. When participants were asked, "What are the negative effect about the COVID situation, did you noticed this yourself ?" the answer was that Frontline had lost their vision. The CEO also recognised this, and this was also the central working point for him, to regain that vision throughout the company. As everybody just immersed themselves in the COVID situation very day, particularly in the first six months, something else had blown up each every day so there was no time for focussing on the vision. Frontline had to rewrite all of their systems based on forecasting and predicting the sale of magazines. Because there was such a focus on surviving, the organisational vision was sometimes lost, and there was no time or place for growth. Employees often felt isolated and sometimes lost motivation.

Managers often had to listen to the problems of their staff and could not always deliver solutions. As mentioned before, they took on a kind of parental role in motivating their teams and making sure everyone was productive. Some people lost connection with the culture and the company, despite having high satisfaction with their jobs before the pandemic. Too much talking about personal problems was also discouraged, even during the pandemic, as employees still needed to focus on productivity.

In addition, employees became used to working from home, and not everyone wanted to return to the office. Sometimes, people worked much longer hours when working from home, spending long hours isolated behind their computers. It was also more difficult to communicate. Employees were not in the office together; therefore, they were not able to ask each other questions quickly. It was also difficult to gauge people's moods without seeing them physically.

During the interviews, several managers articulated the challenge of employees working from home and not coming to the office: "*How do you keep the company's culture and build that community?*" The leaders at Frontline struggled with this question, because without shared experience, there is no shared culture and people feel less allegiance to the organisation. At that point, the company can start to lose people, because they lose their emotional attachment to the business.

5.6 Crisis phases during COVID-19

The literature identifies three phases in a crisis: the pre-crisis phase, the crisis phase, and the post-crisis phase. Frontline's leaders never saw the COVID-19 crisis coming. When working from home was introduced in 2020, everyone thought that they would see each other in two weeks' time, which was not the case. This put an enormous strain on operations. People had to work and stay at home much longer, which had a heavy emotional impact.

During the initial phase of the COVID_19 crisis, quiz nights and Friday drinking nights were organised to help employees feel less alone. The CEO also posted videos of himself on YouTube to speak to employees and make them feel that they are not alone. In addition, at the beginning, the managers and CEO would interrupt meetings for personal business to make people realise that it was okay to be flexible and do other things as long as the work got done.

Although the management teams had many meetings together, their personal opinions were divided regarding whether the company was still in a crisis situation at the time of the interviews.

The CEO did not feel that he was engaged in crisis management anymore: "*I would say I think we're way, way beyond that. I think we've I think what we are in a situation is trying to work out like what is the best way forward from this point.*"

Paula also stated that she was no longer working on crisis management. However, she stated that she was not sure that she was in post-crisis management either. She shared that there was still a lot of catch up to do.

The account manager similarly stated that, in terms of people and her own approach, she was not engaged in crisis management anymore. Her approach to handling daily tasks had returned to the normal way of working, from accounts meetings to monthly catch-ups and other meetings with publishers. She added,*" I don't think that our team feel we're in crisis that I think we're all concerned about the impact on the supply chain at the moment, our sales, because our sales haven't recovered and our costs are going up. So I feel do this is independent at the moment the next year. So I think the biggest concern we have is what's going to be happening next year."*

In contrast, the chief operating officer still felt that he and his team were in crisis management because the supply chain was still impacted by the pandemic. He therefore continued to face problems in people shortages, driver shortages, paper shortages, and energy cost increases. There also was not enough labour in the warehouses.

5.7 Additional survey

In addition to the primary qualitative research, a small survey was conducted. The purpose was to gain additional insights into the characteristics and leadership styles that the Frontline leaders considered important before and after COVID, and to identify the differences. Participants were asked to rank the importance of characteristics for managers and leaders from most important to least important for the period before COVID and after COVID. As eight out of 12 leaders completed the survey, the findings are not significant; nevertheless, some conclusions can be drawn. The survey was conducted online.

Figure 1 details the characteristics deemed important before the pandemic. Leaders considered vision to be extremely important, as well as strategic and critical thinking.

Figure 1: Characteristics important before the pandemic.

	1.		2.		3.		4.		5.		6.		7.		Ø	±
	Σ	%	Σ	%	Σ	%	Σ	%	Σ	%	Σ	%	Σ	%		
1. Vision	5x	62.50	1x	12.50	1x	12.50	-	-	-	-	1x	12.50	-	-	2.00	1.77
2. Empathy	1x	12.50	-	-	2x	25.00	2x	25.00	2x	25.00	1x	12.50	-	-	3.88	1.55
3. Strategic and critical thin..	2x	25.00	3x	37.50	2x	25.00	-	-	1x	12.50	-	-	-	-	2.38	1.30
4. Authentic and self awern..	-	-	1x	12.50	-	-	5x	62.50	1x	12.50	1x	12.50	-	-	4.13	1.13
5. Felxibility	-	-	-	-	1x	12.50	-	-	2x	25.00	2x	25.00	3x	37.50	5.75	1.39
6. Communication	-	-	3x	37.50	1x	12.50	1x	12.50	2x	25.00	1x	12.50	-	-	3.63	1.60
7. Continuous improvement	-	-	-	-	1x	12.50	-	-	-	-	2x	25.00	5x	62.50	6.25	1.39

When asked about important characteristics during the pandemic, participants offered differing answers. Vision remained very important according to the responses, but empathy was also considered very important. Communication also became more important. These findings were also reflected in the interviews. Every manager recognised that they had to show more empathy and keep people reassured about changes. Even in the day-to-day running of the business, communication was necessary to make sure people did not get left behind.

Figure 2: Characteristics important during the pandemic.

	1.		2.		3.		4.		5.		6.		7.		Ø	±
	Σ	%	Σ	%	Σ	%	Σ	%	Σ	%	Σ	%	Σ	%		
1. Vision	3x	37.50	-	-	-	-	2x	25.00	3x	37.50	-	-	-	-	3.25	1.91
2. Empathy	2x	25.00	4x	50.00	1x	12.50	1x	12.50	-	-	-	-	-	-	2.13	0.99
3. Strategic and critical thin..	1x	12.50	-	-	1x	12.50	2x	25.00	3x	37.50	1x	12.50	-	-	4.13	1.55
4. Authentic and self awern..	1x	12.50	-	-	1x	12.50	-	-	2x	25.00	4x	50.00	-	-	4.75	1.83
5. Felxibility	-	-	1x	12.50	2x	25.00	2x	25.00	-	-	2x	25.00	1x	12.50	4.38	1.77
6. Communication	1x	12.50	3x	37.50	3x	37.50	1x	12.50	-	-	-	-	-	-	2.50	0.93
7. Continuous improvement	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1x	12.50	7x	87.50	6.88	0.35

When asked about the importance of certain leadership styles before the pandemic, managers were divided in opinion regarding the authoritative, affiliative, and democratic and pacesetting types. Thus, it is not possible to form a conclusion on which style was preferred within this group based on this survey before COVID.

Figure 3: Leadership styles important before the pandemic.

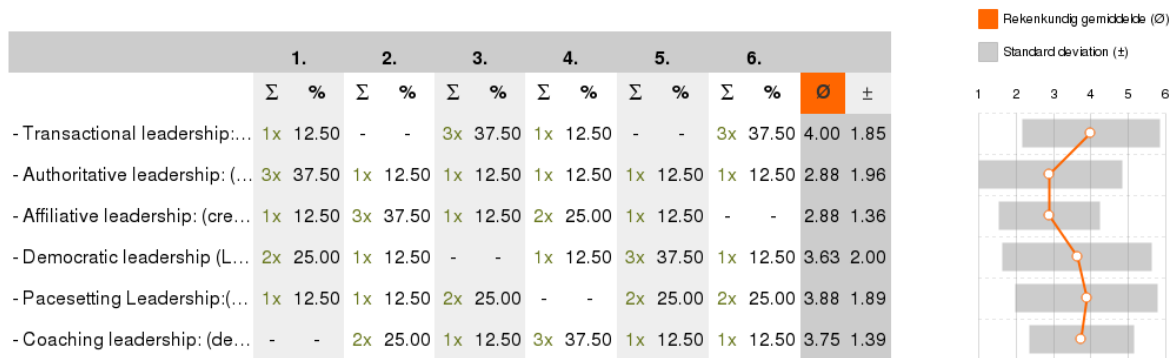|	1.		2.		3.		4.		5.		6.		Ø	±
	Σ	%	Σ	%	Σ	%	Σ	%	Σ	%	Σ	%		
- Transactional leadership:...	-	-	-	-	-	-	1x	12.50	1x	12.50	6x	75.00	5.63	0.74
- Authoritative leadership: (...	2x	25.00	1x	12.50	2x	25.00	2x	25.00	-	-	1x	12.50	3.00	1.69
- Affiliative leadership: (cre...	2x	25.00	1x	12.50	1x	12.50	2x	25.00	2x	25.00	-	-	3.13	1.64
- Democratic leadership (L...	2x	25.00	-	-	2x	25.00	-	-	3x	37.50	1x	12.50	3.63	1.92
- Pacesetting Leadership:(...	2x	25.00	1x	12.50	2x	25.00	1x	12.50	2x	25.00	-	-	3.00	1.60
- Coaching leadership: (de...	-	-	5x	62.50	1x	12.50	2x	25.00	-	-	-	-	2.63	0.92

One leadership style stood out in the responses as important during the pandemic: authoritarian leadership. Managers found this style to be the most important to have during the pandemic to keep the business going. This style fits best with change, as it inspires people to pursue a vision. Especially in the uncertainty of the pandemic, authoritative leadership is a very appropriate style. The teams knew what was expected of them and what they had to do. They were given a vision of how they were going to get out of this pandemic.

Figure 4: Leadership styles important during the pandemic.

	1.		2.		3.		4.		5.		6.		Ø	±
	Σ	%	Σ	%	Σ	%	Σ	%	Σ	%	Σ	%		
- Transactional leadership:...	1x	12.50	-	-	3x	37.50	1x	12.50	-	-	3x	37.50	4.00	1.85
- Authoritative leadership: (...	3x	37.50	1x	12.50	1x	12.50	1x	12.50	1x	12.50	1x	12.50	2.88	1.96
- Affiliative leadership: (cre...	1x	12.50	3x	37.50	1x	12.50	2x	25.00	1x	12.50	-	-	2.88	1.36
- Democratic leadership (L...	2x	25.00	1x	12.50	-	-	1x	12.50	3x	37.50	1x	12.50	3.63	2.00
- Pacesetting Leadership:(...	1x	12.50	1x	12.50	2x	25.00	-	-	2x	25.00	2x	25.00	3.88	1.89
- Coaching leadership: (de...	-	-	2x	25.00	1x	12.50	3x	37.50	1x	12.50	1x	12.50	3.75	1.39

Rekenkundig gemiddelde (Ø)
Standard deviation (±)

6. Discussion

This study examined how Frontline leaders changed their leadership style in response to the COVID-19 crisis. Although every manger has a unique way of leading, many leaders adopted the same skills and styles in response to the pandemic.

Before COVID-19, the people aspect was not a high priority in the company; it was given attention, but was not a priority. Throughout the pandemic, many leaders came to realise that listening, communicating clearly, and paying attention to the situation are critical.

The pandemic was also a learning process for leaders on a personal level. Despite the fact that many of them had been in their positions for a long time, many of these managers and leaders learned a great deal about their skills and styles. Nevertheless, at the time of the interviews, the room for diversification and looking for new opportunities was still not as it was before. The leaders were still dealing with maintenance activities, which made looking forward in the future very difficult. This obligation, together with the declining business because of the ever-growing online market, poses an extra challenge for leaders. They want to move forward and look for new things. There are branches that have worked very well in the crisis and have made good progress, but also parts that are still very affected by the pandemic, that still have to deal with a lot of uncertainty. Many managers feel that they are still in a crisis phase and not in a post-crisis phase, even though they have learned a lot and gained experience.

When participants were asked how they felt leaders communicated to everyone as a Frontline group, opinions were divided, with most feeling that Frontline responded well, especially given the new and uncertain circumstances. Many mangers felt that they were treated well and that communication was good. Frontline also helped people who had to work at home, for example by giving them laptops, desks, and desk chairs to make people more comfortable at home. However, there were also managers who think that Frontline did not communicate enough, especially in the beginning, and could have reacted better and taken more steps to make things more pleasant for people.

Everyone naturally compares their work with other people's jobs, and this sometimes gives a false impression. This sentiment was also indicated in the interview with Paul.

As people understand the atmosphere and culture of the work and nothing actually changes for them when they go to another job, they change more quickly. Paula shared, *"They have got the awkwardness of having to walk around the new office and be the new person and get lost. They don't have to worry about commuting. They don't have to worry about how long it's going to take to get there. That's all gone now. And actually, they could still video call their friends in the day from their old job, and nobody would be any the wiser. And I think that's had a big impact on why a lot of people have left."*

In conclusion, throughout the interviews, many styles and skills emerged that mangers considered important in helping a company through a crisis. However, there is one leadership style that was mentioned the most: the authoritative leadership style. Many leaders found this to be the most difficult or cited many aspects of it. Because a crisis is exceptional and has such a profound effect on everyone, it is important to have someone to listen to during these times. Authoritative leadership refers to a management style in which the leader is in complete control. An authoritative leader is one who sets the goals, determines the processes, and oversees all of the steps to reach those goals, with little or no input from team members. During the pandemic, people were looking for someone to talk to about their problems and were looking for reassurance from leaders. This is what every leader tried to deliver.

In spite of this dominance of an authoritative style, many different characteristics also emerged. Leaders and managers became much more focused on emotion management, listening, and putting people at ease. They started to realise that emotional intelligence is a very important skill and style to have. Emotional intelligence became more central, as well as clear communication and having a vision that people can relate to. It is therefore clear that leaders had to adapt their leadership style during the COVID-19 period. Through changes in their leadership style, they became more empathetic and personal with their team, which created stronger bonds and a stronger feeling of being part of a team. These changes also changed the way of working, which became more personal. The negative effect was that leaders sometimes were busy with how a person felt and their emotional needs instead of focusing on work and setting new goals. Furthermore, while the leadership style became more personal and people felt more connected, there was a challenge to keep the culture alive. That is now the big challenges for the leaders, : How do you keep the culture and build a community? That is very difficult. The leaders at Frontline have struggled with this because from the interviews is seen that a place where true, shared experience is, is what you need. But if there is no shared experience, There will not be that shared culture.

7. Critical reflection and future research

This study explored how leaders and managers changed their leadership style because of COVID-19. Interviews were held with 12 leaders of Frontline. This number was sufficient for this case study research. However, this sample size is too small to draw global conclusions. In order to see a more global picture, there must be a higher number of participants and leaders from different companies. The findings from this research apply to a specific company and a specific sector, and not in general about how companies responded or should respond. These insights will be different in different sectors.

It is important to note that the insights in this research on the best types of leadership or how best to react to the pandemic were based on interviews with managers and not based on financial performance. Insights regarding the best financial outcome for the company cannot be decided here.

Furthermore, the interviews only explored the views of leaders. To get a more comprehensive view of the company, more people should be interviewed, including staff. By not involving the general staff, I cannot assess their perceptions of change. I do not know what they think about whether the leaders and mangers have really changed. Only observations and work where monitored with the personal of the managers and leaders.

Although managers and leaders in general gave similar answers, there were still some differences on certain topics. Nevertheless, the responses are difficult to compare, because the mangers work in different branches of the business. As a result, it is difficult to drawn one overall conclusion about how the changes.

The literature is not yet well developed on what leaders should do during a pandemic. This gap makes it difficult to make deductions about how leaders should adapt their style or how to change. There is no real evidence in scientific papers about what styles lead to the best outcome in this type of situation.

This research can help inform future investigation on this topic. This qualitative case study offers foundational insights on how leadership styles changed during COVID. These findings can be used for further research on this topic, including quantitative research, as the quantitative data collected here was limited. Future research can also elaborate on the connection between certain leadership styles and their effects. This research did not address the impact of certain styles on individuals, but rather how people changed and what the effect was in general for this company. Therefore, it would be valuable to investigate how changes in style have an effect on people working in companies all over the world.

It remains paramount to research the effect of leadership styles in unexpected situations. The better we understand how to respond to an unexpected situation, the less damaging the consequences will be.

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9. appendix

Table 1: Interview data

Informant	Name	Date	Position	Amount of Interviews
1	Paul	15/11/21 F2F	Managing Director retail	1
2	Chris	25/11/21	Managing Director GKM	1
3	Susan	23/11/21	Account Manager	1
4	Frank	20/12/21	CEO	1
5	Phil	22/11/21 F2F	Managing Director retail	1
6	Fiona	3/12/21	HR Manager	1
7	Tracy	5/12/21	Managing Director Seymour	1
8	Nick	22/11/21 F2F	Managing Director publishers	1
9	Sara	10/12/21	Managing Director	1
10	Greg	23/11/21	Group information services director	1
11	Mark	25/11/21	Chief operating Officer	1
12	Paula	22/11/21	Category manager retail marketing	1

Table 2: Observation data

Date	Location	Description
15/11/21	Frontline Peterborough	Participant observation
16/11/21	Frontline London	Participant observation
17/11/21	Frontline London	Participant observation
22/11/21	Frontline Peterborough	Participant observation
23/11/21	Frontline London	Participant observation
29/11/21	Frontline Peterborough	Participant Observation
30/11/21	Frontline London	Participant Observation
2/12/21	Frontline Peterborough	Participant Observation

Interview questions Frontline: How did leadership and management adapt their leadership style during COVID-19.

Introduction

My name is Ruben Girginol, I am just finalizing my 4-year business management degree at the University of Hasselt (Belgium). My last remaining task is the completion of my final assessment/dissertation.

As I needed to work with a specific business I did ask my uncle (Frank) for Frontline's support. I am hoping to complete 10 brief interviews with some of the leadership team.

So now, I am kindly asking you for your help. In return to thank you for your participation and time, I will be making a Donation to the FL charity.

I am currently staying in London and I will be here until the 12th of December. To do the interviews there is the possibility to do them face to face in Frontlines offices. I will be at the offices in Peterborough on Monday the 15th of November and 22nd of November. I will also be at the offices in London on the 15th of November and the 23rd of November. There is also a possibility to do the interviews via Google Teems, if this method is chosen I will send out the invitations over Teams.

The duration of the interviews will be 30-45 minutes depending on the question and how much information there is to give.

There will be +/- 15 guiding questions leading to more open conversation. These questions will be sent out in advance of our meeting.

The Key topics will be:

Organisational and management style change during COVID-19 crisis

How have you / the business had to adapt to change in circumstance.

The effect this had on your team, and your way of working.

Guiding questions for the interview:

Can you give us some background information about who you are and your position within the company?

What does organisational change mean to you? What are the first things you think of when thinking about organisational change

Pre COVID-19, do you recall any other organisational changes you have had to deal with?

As a manager during your time at Frontline, what are the biggest changes you have had to deal with?

Thinking back to these changes, what do you feel were the skills you had to rely on the most to successfully navigate these changes?

From these experiences, how much resistance did you encounter from your team, and how did you deal with any such resistance?

How did you personally deal with change and how might this change your approach?

Talking about COVID-19 specifically, how do feel Frontline responded to this? How did it affect your ability to manage your team?

How did frontline / you have to adapt your style or approach. How did you manage to keep leading your teams (thinking about daily communication/sharing of workload/managing tasks?)

How do you feel your team has responded to these changes? What have you learned from this experience?

What do you believe your team will have valued the most from your approach during this crisis?

What do you believe were the specific skills you had to adapt to be successful during this crisis?

Did the covid crisis require a specific/different approach than any other organisational change you have managed in the past?

What do you believe are the core assets/characteristics of a good leader?

Do you believe you have had to change your leadership style? Way of managing your teams during covid?