The Onslaught of Crisis Leadership Advice: Sifting Through Popular Leadership Sources in the COVID-19 Era

R. Tyler Spradley

Stephen F. Austin State University
Texas, Nacogdoches USA

Abstract: This study critiques COVID-19 crisis leadership discourse in authoritative sources for leadership advice including *Entrepreneur*, *Forbes*, *Fortune*, *Harvard Business Review*, Harvard Business School's COVID-19 Business Impact Center, and *Real Leaders*. Two central lines of inquiry drive this study: First, what are the pervasive practice-based recommendations typified in COVID-19 crisis leadership discourse? Second, whose interest does the COVID-19 crisis leadership discourse serve? Conclusions question the widespread practicality of advice and argue that advice functions to reassert the power dynamic of authoritative texts and super leaders over popular crisis leadership press. Furthermore, advice tends to promote command-and-control leadership with implications for taking advantage of the chaotic, vulnerable moments of crises to promote undemocratic change.

Keywords — crisis communication, crisis leadership, organizational communication, pandemic

SUGGESTED CITATION: Spradley, R. T. (2021). The Onslaught of Crisis Leadership Advice: Sifting Through Popular Leadership Sources in the COVID-19 Era. *Proceedings of the International Crisis and Risk Communication Conference, Volume 4* (pp. 52-55). Orlando FL: Nicholson School of Communication and Media. <https://doi.org/10.30658/icrcc.2021.13>

INTRODUCTION

In the COVID-19 era, an onslaught of crisis leadership advice pervades popular and professional press aimed at timely, relevant practice-driven messages. However, the situational value of such messages may be dependent on a number of variables and contextualization yet to be realized or accounted for in the research and concerns remain as to who is actually benefiting from the recommendations – the manager or the employee, the organization or the individual, the sender or the receiver. Furthermore, if leadership is to be enacted with appreciation and empathy, then the *who is benefiting* question becomes central to constructing a healthy organizational culture that builds up employees and followers. Questions emerge surrounding leadership authenticity, the value behind leader service, and the transformational experiences of stakeholders, publics, and, most importantly, employees (those who are most vulnerable to decisions and visions in organizational life). In sum, there are two veins of inquiry driving this study. First, what are the pervasive practice-based recommendations typified in COVID-19 crisis leadership discourse? Second, whose interest does the COVID-19 crisis leadership discourse serve?

CRITIQUING PANDEMIC CRISIS LEADERSHIP ADVICE

This study uses a critical discourse analysis approach [1, 2] to examine COVID-19 crisis leadership discourse in authoritative sources for leadership advice including *Entrepreneur*, *Forbes*, *Fortune*, *Harvard Business Review*, Harvard Business School's COVID-19 Business Impact Center, and *Real Leaders*. These publications are professionally oriented publications with print and web formats that comprise the data set, and while not a comprehensive collection of all leadership sources, this sampling of texts is representative of popular leadership recommendations that influence the COVID-19 crisis leadership discourse. Articles were reviewed from March-December 2020 by reviewing titles of articles and searching for crisis leadership articles within the publication/site.

To address the first question, *What are the pervasive practice-based recommendations typified in COVID-19 crisis leadership discourse?*, texts were coded and analyzed by implicit and explicit prescriptions made for crisis leaders resulting in two broad categories of recommendations: leadership-specific behaviors or attitudes and leadership-initiated organizational activity or culture, which are summarized in Table 1: Leadership-Specific Behaviors or Attitudes and Table 2: Leadership-Initiated Organizational Activity or Culture. Overall, articles followed formulaic prescriptions for

ISSN: 2576-9111

© 2021 Copyright is held by the owner/author(s).

Publication rights are licensed to ICRCC.

<https://doi.org/10.30658/icrcc.2021.13>

leadership-specific or leader-initiated actions: describe the context of crisis leadership currently, enumerate a set of crisis leadership actions, support actions with quotes from leaders, and encourage crisis leaders to follow through with implementation in customized applications of the prescriptions. Results are reviewed in Tables 1 and 2.

PROTECTING THE ORGANIZATION, FOLLOWERS, AND SELF

Leadership-specific behaviors or attitudes advocated in the advice of the authoritative texts within this study elevate leaders as protectors of the organization (first), as well as followers and self. Interestingly, the advice does portray some of the assumptions and values of authentic, servant, and transformational leadership approaches. As such, it is important to recognize the impact these leadership perspectives have on contemporary leadership practices. However, the language of the advice bends toward leader-centric and romanticized views of leaders as saviors or, at minimum, momentary heroes due to the underlying assumptions. These prescriptive leadership-specific behaviors and attitudes act as magical beans for the *protector*. Simply, enact X and Y will happen (see Table 1).

Table 1: Leadership-Specific Behaviors or Attitudes

Leadership-Specific Behavior or Attitude	Prescription	Exemplary Quote
Adapt	Change behaviors and attitudes in relevant ways to the condition of the crisis and the ways in which it is affecting followers	Specific iterations of adaptive behaviors varied. For example, shifting to “command-and-control leadership” initially, but warned that such leadership had to transition back to more democratic decision-making [3].
Be Kind	Generally, be kind by demonstrating care, follower-centric behaviors, and communicating personally.	In an article advocating for kindness, Groysberg and Seligson [4] begin with a quote from Henry James, “The pandemic is not a time for a stern, iron-fisted approach to leadership and management.”
Be Transparent	Communication should be transparent and avoid ambiguity, delays, and deception.	“It takes wisdom and some courage to understand that communicating with transparency is a vital antidote to this risk” [5].
Empathize	Demonstrate empathy for followers by acknowledging complex, difficult situations and advocating for support	Quoting Bill Gadala, CFO of Vera Security, “Without a larger dose of empathy, you risk alienating people, which hurts them and others in the team, as well as yourself” [6].
Encourage/Support	Communicate encouraging and supportive messages that provide degree of certainty and/or express gratitude	“Given how quickly and drastically the pandemic has changed people’s personal and work lives and all the uncertainty that lies ahead, people are looking to their leaders more than ever for guidance and support” [7].
Request & Respond to Feedback	Communicate with followers requesting their feedback and responding in kind	“Most effective positive influence role models not only listen, but they respond with plans to implement these ideas” [8].
Self-Care	Take care of one’s own well-being	“CEOs and top management need to prioritize taking care of their own health. Boards need to persuade their leadership teams to make this a priority” [9].

The authoritative texts are maintaining grandiose views of leaders that negate the agency of followers and other stakeholders [10]. Communication scholars contribute to the furtherance of follower agency by demonstrating the co-constructed nature of organizational life [11] and the anemic transmissional view of communication, where communication is reduced to information processing from the source to the receiver [12, 13]. Leadership is communal and interdependent versus individualistic and disassociated. While these behaviors and attitudes promote the role of protector, which does have implications for providing aid to the organization, followers, and oneself during a crisis, they also promote assumptions that without leadership, followers and employees have limited agency or display disconnected sensemaking – an inability to draw on information sources and experience to make sense of the chaotic crisis ecology.

CULTIVATING ORGANIZATIONAL ACTIVITIES OR CULTURE TOWARD CHANGE

While leader-specific behaviors and attitudes focused on the leader’s role in the organization to protect and care for the organization, followers, and self, the organizational activities and culture the leader is expected to cultivate during a crisis focus on reframing the crisis as an opportunity, which is not foreign to crisis management and communication

scholars or practitioners [14]. Crisis leadership prescriptions situate the crisis as an opportunity for innovation, planning, positioning talent/resources, progressing, and reflecting. For a summation of the reframed crisis as opportunity, see Table 2.

Table 2: Leadership-Initiated Organizational Activity or Culture

Leadership-Initiated Organizational Activity or Culture	Prescriptive Activity or Culture	Exemplary Quotation
Innovate	Change through innovation is diversely conceived (e.g. cost-cutting for efficiency, cross-functional teams, creativity exercises) but results in crisis-enabled change	“Similarly, the pandemic knocked down many longstanding regulatory barriers and timelines to expedite treatments, expand telemedicine, and kickstart vaccine testing. So too, should leaders think outside the box when seeking to deliver impact within this new normal” [15].
Plan	Crisis planning is an ongoing organizational activity with evaluation and revision	Quoting from Arif Harbott’s co-written book, Percy [16] writes, “Remember that plans are hypotheses, not facts. Once you execute your plan, look at whether you are getting closer or further away from your objective, then assess your next best action. You can then rinse and repeat this process until your project outcome is successfully achieved.”
Position Talent	Assess and position talent within the organization to give them authority and voice to resolve issues, plan, and situate the organization for future success	“...focus on people and their capabilities” [17]. “Hire and promote people who are resilient, adaptable, and exhibit grace under fire” [18].
Reflect	Reflect on organizational goals, history, outcomes, and future	“What this means, however, is that we will have a good opportunity to really reflect on our business and its processes for a few months without the constant stress of trying to beat targets and push ourselves on that front” stated the co-founder of Authority Hacker [19]
Progress	Make difficult decisions to move forward	“The risks of delayed decision-making are often invisible. But in a crisis, waiting vital time in the vain hope that greater clarity will prove no action is needed is dangerous...” [20].

Advice from this set of authoritative texts advocates using the chaotic and change-demanding environment of the pandemic as an opportunity to make organizational changes that either have or have not been previously considered. Essentially, the vulnerable time is ripe for change because followers, stakeholders, and employees are already coping with forced change or disruption in everyday life. In the chaos of crisis, lies the power to change, transform. However, little advice advocates inclusion of all stakeholders in decision making for those changes. Almost in blatant opposition, leaders are being advised to take a command-and-control, authoritative, posture during the crisis to use the chaos to promote or implement undemocratic “innovation, strategic plans, repositioning employees, and making progress.” These can be, and often are, advantageous actions for organizational viability; yet, without the proper balance of inclusion of the vulnerable employee, these actions can be forceful, directives that promote myopic leadership. If leadership is not taught as a communal, interdependent communication process, then there is a risk for crisis leadership to become authoritative, directive, and biased toward managerial and organizational benefits. Crisis leadership has the potential to become a strain of leadership that talks the talk of empathy and hope but implements directives and executive fiat to evolve organizations under the darkness of a crisis without full disclosure or communal consideration of the outcomes. Does crisis leadership advice serve the interests of the vulnerable while they are most vulnerable?

In sum, *whose interest does the COVID-19 crisis leadership discourse serve?* Understanding the power implications of leadership in chaotic, vulnerable times of uncertainty and ambiguity is paramount to preventing abuse and disassociating the from the communal, interdependent nature of leadership. Discussion points demonstrate that popular crisis leadership advice assumes: 1) leaders exert high degrees of agency over organizational activity, culture, and members, 2) followers are passive actors in the leader-follower relationship, and 3) organizations are insularly, to a degree, from external influences. Because of idealized assumptions, conclusions question the widespread practicality of advice and argue that advice functions to reassert the power dynamic of authoritative texts and super leaders over popular crisis leadership press. From a communicative lens, not only should agency be considered for leaders and followers, but a healthy suspicion should critique crisis leadership as decisions and power moves construct discursive and material

implications for the positioning of leaders and followers – more significantly, organizational members and other stakeholders. In addition to romanticizing leadership as the source of renewal and healing, popular COVID-19 leadership advice introduces a thread of authoritative, directive leadership that enacts progressive changes under the shroud of chaotic tragedy.

Author Biography

R. Tyler Spradley, Ph.D. (Texas A&M University) is a Professor of Communication at Stephen F. Austin State University, mrspradley@sfasu.edu.

REFERENCES

- [1] Fairclough, N. (2013). *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language*. Routledge.
- [2] Fairclough, N., & Wodak, R. (1997). Critical discourse analysis. In T.A. Van Dijk (Ed.), *Discourse as social interaction* (Vol. 2, pp. 258-284). Sage.
- [3] Benjamin, D. & Komlos, D. (2020 Aug. 4). A cautionary tale around crisis leadership styles. *Forbes*. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/benjaminkomlos/2020/08/04/a-cautionary-tale-around-crisis-leadership-styles/?sh=3325b11a5171>
- [4] Groysberg, B. & Seligson, S. (2020 Nov. 1). *Good leadership is an act of kindness*. Retrieved from <https://hbswk.hbs.edu/item/good-leadership-is-an-act-of-kindness>
- [5] Karrissey, M.J. & Edmondson, A.C. (2020 April 13). What good leadership looks like during this pandemic. *Harvard Business Review*. <https://hbr.org/2020/04/what-good-leadership-looks-like-during-this-pandemic>
- [6] Layton, B. & OMalley, J.J. (2020 Nov. 14). How to become a great pandemic-era leader. *Real Leaders*. Retrieved from <https://real-leaders.com/how-to-become-a-great-pandemic-era-leader>
- [7] Holtom, B, Edmondson, A.C., & Niu, D. (2020 July 9). 5 tips for communicating with employees during a crisis. *Harvard Business Review*. <https://hbr.org/2020/07/5-tips-for-communicating-with-employees-during-a-crisis>
- [8] Parker, G. (2020 April 19). 5 ways real leaders act when a crisis hits. *Real Leaders*. <https://real-leaders.com/5-ways-real-leaders-act-when-a-crisis-hits>
- [9] Silverthorne, S. (2020 Oct. 6). *18 tips managers can use to lead through COVID's rising waters*. Retrieved from <https://hbswk.hbs.edu/item/18-tips-managers-can-use-to-navigate-covid-s-rising-waters>
- [10] Collinson, D. (2006). Rethinking followership: A post-structuralist analysis of follower identities. *The leadership quarterly*, 17(2), 179-189. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2005.12.005>
- [11] Barge, J. K., & Fairhurst, G. T. (2008). Living leadership: A systemic constructionist approach. *Leadership*, 4(3), 227-251. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715008092360>
- [12] Fairhurst, G. T., & Connaughton, S. L. (2014). Leadership: A communicative perspective. *Leadership*, 10(1), 7-35. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715013509396>
- [13] Fairhurst, G. T. (2008). Discursive leadership: A communication alternative to leadership psychology. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 21(4), 510-521. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0893318907313714>
- [14] Ulmer, R. R., Sellnow, T. L., & Seeger, M. W. (2019). *Effective crisis communication: Moving from crisis to opportunity*, 4th Ed. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- [15] Stone, E.M. (2020 Dec. 10). Four leadership lessons from healthcare's COVID-19 response. *Real Leaders*. <https://real-leaders.com/four-lessons-leaders-can-learn-from-healthcares-covid-19-response>
- [16] Percy, S. (2020 Nov. 18). How to lead when nobody knows what will happen next. *Forbes*, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/sallypercy/2020/11/18/how-to-lead-when-nobody-knows-what-will-happen-next/>
- [17] Pacthod, D. & Park, M. (2020 July 28). To lead in the post-COVID-19 crisis tomorrow, put the right leadership capabilities in place today. *Fortune*, <https://fortune.com/2020/07/28/covid-19-management-training-business-leadership-innovation>
- [18] Chatman, J. & Gino, F. (2020 Aug. 17). Don't let the pandemic sink your company culture. *Harvard Business Review*. <https://hbr-org.cdn.ampproject.org/c/s/hbr.org/amp/2020/08/dont-let-the-pandemic-sink-your-company-culture>
- [19] Schreiber, G. (2020 March 18). Crisis survival guide: How 66 CEOs and executives are leading from home. *Real Leaders*. <https://real-leaders.com/crisis-survival-guide-how-66-ceos-and-executives-are-leading-from-home>
- [20] Karrissey, M.J. & Edmondson, A.C. (2020 April 13). What good leadership looks like during this pandemic. *Harvard Business Review*. <https://hbr.org/2020/04/what-good-leadership-looks-like-during-this-pandemic>