The Influence of the Pandemic COVID-19 on the Leadership Styles of Management

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Abstract: The goal of the research conducted in the paper is to indicate changes in leadership styles that occurred as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. The author, through the analysis of various sources of literature, emphasized the changes in the leadership styles of managers that occurred as a result of the pandemic. The work contains a description of the behavior of leaders who successfully adapted to the changes that took place during the crisis. Special attention in the paper is devoted to the importance of shifting the focus of leaders from achieving the company’s business goals to a much broader perspective, which also includes helping employees to more easily face the uncertainty and risks they were exposed to during the Covid-19 pandemic. The paper aims to point out the practices of successful leaders, which are largely applicable in conditions after the end of the pandemic.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic represents the most complex situation that modern society has faced since the end of World War II. It represents the largest global pandemic after the Spanish flu, which occurred at the beginning of the 20th century (Ahern & Loh, 2020). The pandemic, which lasted more than a year at the global level, resulted in changes in all segments of society. Companies had to adapt all segments of their business to the new market conditions, which required them to implement very significant and comprehensive changes. Managers had to adapt their leadership styles and ways of behaving to the new conditions, which required paying much more attention to employees and providing assistance in dealing more effectively with the pandemic and its consequences. The Covid-19 pandemic was an event that represented a global surprise in many ways, for which no country had prepared response plans. Society has experienced drastic changes in all segments of its functioning, even in the simplest forms, such as the introduction of social distancing, movement bans, the obligation to wear masks, etc. (Francisco et al., 2020)

2. DILEMMA THAT LEADERS FACED DURING THE PANDEMIC OF COVID-19

The Covid-19 pandemic presented an extremely big challenge for leaders in all parts of the world, regardless of the size and activity of companies and their position in organizational structures. The complexity of the challenges facing leaders was compounded by the high levels of uncertainty associated with the pandemic. The pandemic represented a test of all business segments and the ability of managers to adequately adapt their behavior to the new situation. As a common feature of major health crises, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, the fact that they put leaders in front of challenges that are significantly different from the challenges they face in all other crises stands out (Baker, 2020).
During the pandemic, leaders faced a large number of dilemmas and conflicting demands. An additional problem was the fact that there were no simple answers to most of these dilemmas, which significantly complicated the work of leaders and made decision-making difficult (Harris & Jones, 2020). Taking into account all, often conflicting perspectives, is of key importance in adapting the leadership behaviors of managers to new conditions. During the pandemic, managers were faced with numerous requirements that did not exist until then, which resulted in a large number of dilemmas they faced (Baker, 2020).

The basic and most significant dilemma faced by managers during the Covid-19 pandemic was reflected in the definition of leadership activities that they will emphasize during their work. In addition to achieving the best possible results in conditions characterized by numerous changes in the market and high levels of uncertainty, managers had to pay much more attention to employees and their fears that were a consequence of the pandemic.

3. CHANGES IN THE BEHAVIOR OF LEADERS CAUSED BY THE PANDEMIC COVID-19

Good leaders can effectively and appropriately assign meaning to situations characterized by high levels of complexity and uncertainty (Gurr & Drysdale, 2020). Expressed uncertainty, which is one of the basic characteristics of the Covid-19 pandemic, presented numerous challenges to managers, which they had to face in the best possible way. Uncertainty required significant changes in all segments of the decision-making process and the creation of very quick responses to the changes that were occurring, which are not characteristic of management in traditional business conditions (Ahern & Loh, 2020). As the basic and most significant challenge faced by the leaders during the pandemic, the need for major changes in the behavior towards the employees stood out, without which it was not possible to ensure the effective management of the new situation.

One of the main tasks that the Covid-19 pandemic placed before the leaders were reflected in emphasizing the care of employees (Wilson, 2020). The development of the pandemic and the consequences it led to indicated significant changes in the behavior of a large number of managers, who began to devote more and more attention to recognizing the needs of employees and showing empathy towards them and willingness to help them. Managers' leadership styles had to be adapted to radical changes in employees' priorities and emphasis on personal and family members' health.

The drastic increase in the number of employees who work from home and the transition of schools to an online teaching system required an emphasis on establishing the best possible balance between the private and business obligations of employees. A factor that greatly influenced the behavior of employees during this period was their exposure to the uncertainty associated with a situation that could threaten their lives and health. Successful leaders indicated to employees that the companies and they personally are aware of the changes in their priorities and that they fully understand them.

A large number of managers at the highest levels already at the beginning of the pandemic addressed employees with messages that aimed to show the company's concern for them and their families. Companies and their managers have changed their behavior and attitude towards employees to a very large extent. Leaders increasingly focused their activities on the emotional, mental
and physical well-being of employees. Numerous companies have also created various support programs, which have enabled their managers to significantly improve their leadership styles.

The analysis of the activities carried out during the Covid-19 pandemic indicated one common characteristic of the behavior of all successful companies and the leaders who work in them. All successful leaders emphasized employees in their work, while business activities were put on the back burner. Initial changes in managers' leadership behaviors were reflected in ensuring the safety of employees (Briscoe & Nyereyemhuka, 2022). In addition to employees, these activities in a large number of companies were also aimed at customers, to support them in times of crisis, which after the end of the pandemic in many cases increased their loyalty to the company.

The changes that successful leaders implemented during the Covid-19 pandemic were largely based on changes in the wants and needs of employees and customers. The perceptions of all people during the pandemic have changed to a very significant extent compared to the period before the pandemic. These changes resulted in extremely large changes in factors that affect employee motivation. Leadership styles had to be adapted to these changes, to ensure that the activities carried out by managers have a positive effect on employees and their motivation. For all employees, regardless of their position in the organizational hierarchy and salary, during the crisis, the emphasis was placed on satisfying the basic needs from Maslow's hierarchy, above all those directed towards safety, security and health.

A large number of changes in leadership behaviors that occurred during the Covid-19 pandemic remained present in the work of managers even after the end of the pandemic. The leadership styles of managers must still be directed towards using the principles of empathy and concern for the well-being of employees. The emphasis on leadership behavior changes after the end of the pandemic must be placed on physical, psychological and financial elements.

The segment of leadership that is directed toward the physical well-being of employees includes behaviors that emphasize the cleanliness of the work environment, safety and health of employees (Ahern & Loh, 2020). Leadership activities aimed at psychological elements include various forms of improvement of working conditions, such as the introduction of flexible working hours, the possibility of working from home, etc. Even though it was introduced as an imposed solution to the problems caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, working from home has become an element that, even after its end, has a significant positive impact on employee motivation. Working from home has a significant positive effect on the well-being of employees' families, as it enables them to take care of children and elderly family members.

4. THE IMPORTANCE OF GAINING THE TRUST OF THE EMPLOYEES

Trust is an individual's expectation or belief, often in cases of vulnerability, that the motives or actions of another person are sincere, honest, and based on integrity and respect for ethical principles (Hutchinson, 2018). It can exist at the level of a system, an organization or an individual. Trust is a key element of leadership in modern business organizations. Establishing trust between managers and employees is one of the prerequisites for successful leadership (Bligh, 2017).

Situations in which employees are exposed to high levels of stress, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, further increase the importance of employees' trust in leaders. During the pandemic, successful leaders emphasized activities that should create trust among employees, as well as
all other interest groups associated with the company. Trust represented one of the most important elements of leadership behaviors, which was directed toward assisting employees to face the negative impacts and consequences of the pandemic more efficiently.

In situations characterized by high levels of uncertainty, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, the task of managers is to continuously collect relevant data and information that they will use in their leadership activities. All leader activities must be based on information that comes from reliable sources and they must be aligned with credible expertise and advice from professionals. In this way, the trust of employees is ensured, who see in leaders not only managers but also people who are ready to help them in situations when they are worried about themselves and their closest people (Ahern & Loh, 2020).

5. CHARACTERISTICS OF LEADERS WHO WERE SUCCESSFUL DURING THE PANDEMIC

Leaders' responses to crises and all activities they carry out during them must be based on ethics and value-based principles. In this way, leaders create a common sense of purpose among employees, which has proven to be a very strong motivating factor in the conditions of the Covid-19 pandemic (Wilson, 2020). The personal and professional values of managers, which support their ethical behavior in crises, represent the framework of their decision-making process. Leaders need to create a feeling among all employees that the greatest possible efforts are being made to protect them from the negative consequences of the pandemic, whereby a special emphasis must be placed on those persons who are in direct contact with consumers (Imai, 2020).

As elements of leadership behavior that have proven to be particularly effective in this segment, the creation of guidelines for the protection of the health of employees and their families, the provision of a sufficient number of employees who will rotate on the riskiest jobs, and the effective management of workload and well-being of employees can be singled out. The best results during the pandemic were achieved by those leaders who openly and honestly communicated with employees about all the uncertainties that existed.

High levels of empathy play an especially important role in situations where employees are exposed to risks and fears. Successful leaders expressed gratitude to employees for their efforts during the pandemic. It is very important that managers, in the stressful conditions that characterized the environment during the Covid-19 pandemic, show an interest in employees and their private lives, while providing help in situations when the need arises. In this way, higher levels of loyalty are created among employees, since they no longer see the company exclusively as a place where they work, but also as an organization that can help them in situations when the need arises.

Successful leaders took every opportunity to personally thank individuals and groups for the efforts they made while doing their jobs. Leaders are often ready to forgive employees for bad results if they have made efforts to do the job properly (Artigiani, 2005). The authentic leadership style that was developed in a large number of companies during the pandemic was based on honesty, showing concern and benevolence towards employees and their family members.

The pandemic and the states' responses to it, such as movement restrictions, have led to a feeling of uncertainty and anxiety in a large number of people, which in the most severe forms could completely paralyze their ability to function. During the pandemic, successful leaders tried as
much as possible to create an environment in which employees would feel that they could gain support in any situation when the need arises. Leaders and employees co-created environments that helped companies face the pandemic more effectively and achieve better results.

In creating and maintaining relationships based on trust, during the Covid-19 virus pandemic, both leaders and employees played an equally important role. Leaders must have confidence in the employees they lead, especially in situations where employees have been given some responsibility or when they are actively involved in decision-making processes. The adjustment of the leader's attitude towards the employees and their alignment with the new conditions was one of the most important factors that influenced the success of the company's operations during the pandemic and in the period after it.

6. CONCLUSION

The Covid-19 pandemic has become one of the biggest global health crises in human history. It had previously unheard-of global negative effects in all segments of society's functioning, shutting down entire countries and leading to an exponential increase in the number of patients and deaths. The pandemic has placed managers who manage companies in extremely sensitive positions, which has made their work significantly more difficult. The application of leadership styles that were used before the pandemic proved to be insufficiently effective in a large number of cases, primarily due to changes in the behavior of employees and the numerous fears they were exposed to, which did not affect their behavior before it.

Uncertainty, an excessive amount of information that often came from unverified or unreliable sources and the extent of the crisis that arose can be singled out as the most important elements that influenced the behavior of employees. The best results during the crisis were achieved by managers who emphasize employees and found ways to calm them down and instill a sense of security in them. The leadership styles applied by successful managers created the impression among employees that the companies they work for are strong and reliable sources of support in crises that they and their families are going through. The Covid-19 pandemic and changes in leadership styles and ways of doing business in companies have greatly affected the awareness of the roles they play in modern society. In addition to the role of business entities, modern companies are also social organizations, whose goal is to ensure positive effects for the people employed in them, customers and society as a whole.

References


