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# LEADERSHIP IN TIMES OF CRISIS

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## Abstract

Crisis (greek: krisis) means a turning point, a breakthrough; decisive moment; a qualitative change of a system or in a system. In the theory of crisis, the system considered is an organism, an institution, an organization, including the society<sup>1</sup>. In the objective sense, it means „breaking” the existing system, consisting in changing its structure or function, or both elements together. In the ontological sense, however, a crisis is the cumulation of accumulated conflicts in various areas of social life. Conflicts, however, are ubiquitous and embedded in the very structure of society<sup>2</sup>. The term „crisis” has also a pragmatic meaning from a legal and organizational perspective. It is usually assumed that the crisis does not have to pose a significant threat to the security of a given entity in order to occur. However, it is important that it constitutes a challenge to take remedial steps in a situation that constitutes a violation of the basic values and interests of a given entity, generally recognized as worth being protected and defended. Hence, new challenges constantly appear, forcing both theoreticians and practitioners in the field of management to analyze existing situations, search for new solutions and implement various innovative preventive and stabilizing actions. This is where the role of leadership and the way it is performed in an organization becomes visible, which is what this article is about.

## Key words

Leadership, crisis, Covid-19, epidemic, organization

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1 See: *Słownik wyrazów obcych*, Warsaw 1980, s. 401.

2 R. Wróblewski, *Zarys teorii kryzysu, zagadnienia prewencji i zarządzania kryzysami*, Warsaw 1996, p. 10.

## Introduction

A crisis is one of the cycles in which society and economy function, and therefore affects all organizations operating within them. As often as not, a crisis is a set of events that disrupt regular functioning, occurring at an unspecified time and often leading to unforeseen events.<sup>3</sup> A crisis is a time that requires managers to make, often controversial, decisions; conduct activities in an undefined environment, and the decision-making process itself differs significantly from the standard one.<sup>4</sup> Very often, a crisis forces a manager to take risky actions and decisions that cover the entire sphere of life, both of the organization and the private functioning of the decision-maker. For this reason, it is necessary to continuously monitor the changes taking place, and the first signals of a crisis situation may be noticed in case of appropriate actions in the field of control and monitoring of tasks and processes, as well as an appropriate approach to enterprise management<sup>5</sup>. Possible to be noticed symptoms of the crisis include both financial aspects (decrease in profitability, increase in debt, loss of accounting liquidity, difficulties in financing current and development activities) and non-financial aspects (irrationality in employee's behaviour, intra-organizational conflicts, fear, resistance to changes,

crisis of means and methods of action, tension, struggle for power, undermining the authority of management)<sup>6</sup>. We should also bear in mind the diversity of crisis situations, which can be divided depending on the adopted criterion: according to the pace and duration of the crisis (sudden and chronic), according to the place and cause of the crisis (internal and external), according to the effects of the crisis (destructive and creative), according to the causes of crisis (real and virtual)<sup>7</sup>. The causes of the crisis may be various, from internal ones, eg. inappropriate strategy, employment, financial, technological, and organizational issues; to external ones, such as: social and legal changes, modification of the competitive environment or health aspects, like epidemics. Regardless of the typologies mentioned above, a crisis has three clearly defined phases: symptoms, escalation, and de-escalation. Therefore, theoretical assumptions regarding crisis management are widely developed and new solutions related to managing the threats resulting from crisis are proposed. Nevertheless, new challenges constantly arise, forcing both management theorists and practitioners to analyze existing situations, search for new solutions and implement various innovative preventive and stabilizing actions.

3 See: M. Feltynowski, M. Langer, *The role of EASer project in enhancing search and rescue teams performance*, "Safety & Fire Technology" 2019, Volume 53, Issue 1, p. 130-143.

4 M. Feltynowski, M. Zawistowski, *Threats related to the use of unmanned systems in emergency services*, "Safety & Fire Technology" 2018, Volume 51, p. 138-149.

5 M. Michałowska, D. Stankiewicz, W. Danielak, *Zarządzanie sytuacją kryzysową w przedsiębiorstwie, Współczesny kryzys finansowo-gospodarczy. Istota, przebieg i konsekwencje*, „Zeszyty Naukowe Polskiego Towarzystwa Ekonomicznego w Zielonej Górze” 2015, No. 2, p. 112.

6 Ibidem.

7 Ibidem.

## Leadership in organization

This is where the role of leadership and the way it is performed in the organization becomes visible. Appropriately developed and directed leadership – leadership behaviours are of the key importance for an organization operating in times of crisis, but also before it. Therefore, it is not surprising that attempts are justified to determine what type of leaders and what their behaviours are desired by organizations that have to operate in crisis conditions.

Following the above line of thought, we should first clarify who a leader is and how he should behave. This task, however, turns out not to be easy, even though in recent years the importance of the leadership phenomenon has increased significantly due to its popularization in many organizations that have recognized the role of leaders as an effective way of integrating organizational success factors and management functions. Leadership is an extremely interesting and multi-faceted phenomenon described in very different ways in the research literature.

One of the earliest and most general approaches is to view leadership as a process of influencing people aimed at achieving a goal<sup>8</sup>. Among the theories describing leadership, the main ones mentioned were: the theory of leadership traits – R. Blake and J. Mouton; the leadership style depending on the situation – F.E. Fiedler; situational leadership – P. Hersey and K. Blanchard;

emotional intelligence as a key feature of a leader – D. Goleman; leadership brand – D. Ulrich and N. Smallwood; as well as many other less popular concepts. Over the years, all theories regarding the essence of leadership have pointed to various aspects of this phenomenon, somehow automatically completing each other's deficiencies.

According to R. Griffin, leadership is nothing else but the leadership function, which, together with three other functions, such as planning, decision-making and organizing and controlling, makes up the process of managing an organization. Leadership itself is a set of processes used to induce organizational members to cooperate in the interest of the organization<sup>9</sup>. Leadership is therefore an integral part of the management process, but although there is a difference between management and leadership and these are slightly different concepts in modern organizations, the concept should be integrated with each other<sup>10</sup>. The leadership process involves setting organizational goals and providing far-reaching support to the activities of team members and the entire organization in achieving its goals. Therefore, it is about the influence of a leader who brings out in people everything that is necessary to achieve success. In case of treating leadership as a personal characteristic, the emphasis is on the personal characteristics attributed to leaders. The source of leadership is not necessarily a formal position in the organizational hierarchy but may be a position based on

8 R. M. Stogdill, *Leaders, membership, and organizations*, „Psychological Bulletin” 1950, No. 25, p. 3.

9 R. Griffin, *Podstawy zarządzania organizacjami*, Warsaw 1996, p. 45-50.

10 J. Stoner, R. Freeman, D. Gilbert, *Kierowanie*, Warsaw 1997, p. 21.

positive interactions such as sympathy, admiration, mutual respect, and trust. This strictly concerns the personality of the leader, his charisma, skills, but also competences that make other individuals want to follow the path indicated by the leader and create similar features in themselves.

## Theoretical aspects of the crisis

Referring such a perceived leadership to periods of crisis, the most important aspect is defining the fact of the crisis and assessing the degree of threat it brings. Such measurement may be based on various determinants and causative factors, however, the most important include the period of time in which the crisis-generating aspects are defined, the level of threat or the area they will cover.<sup>11</sup> In relations to the above issues, as part of the organization's activities, crisis management systems are designed in such way that they have a specific structure and answer the questions about the purpose of the activity, the direction of action, the entities covered by this activity and the instruments used within it. It will be up to leaders to recognize the identified threats as significant enough to be taken seriously by the organization<sup>12</sup>. It should also be remembered that crisis conditions seem to generate uncertainty at a level that usually means an adaptation strategy, which is tantamount to investing in specific capabilities<sup>13</sup>. The proper

selection of these capabilities is also the domain of leadership.

It is also worth emphasizing that the traditional approach to crisis management is based on the assumption that crisis management means waiting for the situation to deteriorate and then limiting the damage. A slightly more modern approach assumes that the set of organizational action plans should always be regulated, and managers should think about possible future events and be prepared to deal with the uncertainty in which they will perform their roles. Therefore, crisis management emphasizes the need to anticipate and prepare the organization to deal with problems of regular internal and external stresses, serious threats to the reputation, profitability, or life of the organization.

A crisis is sometimes defined as „a serious shock in an organization that is widely commented on in the media, and curious people influence the issue on ordinary activities and may have an impact on political, legal, financial and governmental organizations”. However, the crisis does not appear suddenly and is often a warning signal indicating potential problems. The crisis has an interesting parallel with the biological model. For example, Gowne Zalz-Hiro and Pratt suggested that crisis may be a mechanism similar to the process of birth, growth, maturity and decline, or the passing of death. In Chinese, the word „Vijay” (WEIJI) is equivalent to the word „crisis” and means risk and

11 A. Fellner, M. Feltykowski, R. Fellner, *Przygotowanie nawigacyjne bezzałogowych statków powietrznych do operacyjnych działań straży pożarnej*, „Zeszyty Naukowe SGSP” 2021, Volume 3, Issue 79, p. 51-82.

12 M. H. Bazerman, M. D. Watkins, *Zagrożenia do przewidzenia*, Gliwice 2006, p. 202.

13 H. Courtney, J. Kirkland, P. Viguere, *Strategia w warunkach niepewności*, [w:] *Zarządzanie w warunkach niepewności*, Gliwice 2006, p. 37.

opportunity<sup>14</sup>. In this perspective, crisis, along with appropriate leadership in the organization, is the embodiment of Sun-Tzu's words that „in the midst of chaos there is also an opportunity”.

Therefore, the crisis itself can be perceived as an opportunity both to verify the system – to change it, including to enrich it with solutions that have not been taken into account so far or seemed unrealistic to implement. The beginning of the path to dealing with the crisis can be found in three basic slogans: „reducing the likelihood of disruptions, shortening their duration and limiting their impact on key products and services”<sup>15</sup>. Reducing the negative impact on the organization's activities requires, in the first phase, defining the elements influencing their formation and excluding them from the system. It may mean shortening their duration (depending on the type of crisis) or reducing the problems we face.

## Transformational leadership

Transformational leadership involves individuals, leaders and followers who take their morality and motivation to higher levels through mutual engagement. It is therefore based on strongly interconnected and interdependent learning and mutual enrichment while achieving goals. This encourages taking up the challenge of self-improvement. It should be remembered that perfection is not given to man, therefore the only thing one can and should expect from

himself is progress. Leadership implementing the transformation function forced by the crisis can also be understood as a process of influencing others by achieving goals that become common and desirable. For this reason, the leader is the embodiment of the will of the team and his efforts should be aimed at achieving the common vision through cooperation based on adopted values and goals. Leadership is considered here in the context of a group. True leadership attracts others and cannot be based on manipulation, instructing or commanding. The most important area of a leader's influence on other participants of the organization is inspiring them and stimulating to survive in difficult times.

The inspiration comes from, among others, what the leader does and what he represents – the leader's attitudes and thinking patterns are key here. Of particular importance here will be the enthusiasm, creativity, entrepreneurship, sensitivity and perseverance of the leader, with which he should somehow infect others by shaping building patterns and attitudes in them. In addition, it will concern such issues as: the way of acting, making decisions, behaviour towards others, self-improvement and support of others, etc. Through inspiration and stimulation that energize employees, they can achieve better results both individually and as part of a team. As J.M. Burns pointed out, „the ultimate test of moral leadership is its ability to transcend the demands of

14 M. Karimi Mehr, R. Jahanian, *Crisis Management and Its Process in Organization*, “Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences” 2016, Vol 7 No 5, p. 143-148.

15 H. Hamidovic, *An Introduction to Crisis Management*, “ISACA Journal” 2012, Volume 5, p. 1.

countless everyday needs, desires and expectations”<sup>16</sup>.

Leadership should therefore motivate employees and discover their potential and stimulate to overcome barriers related to politics, bureaucracy or limited organizational resources, as well as eliminate the weaknesses and use the employee’s strengths. Leaders inspire and stimulate others to achieve better results that make a specific situation of the organization better. By motivating and inspiring, a transformational leader releases positive energy in his or her colleagues to act, and also awakens the need to inspire, stimulate and motivate. In general, this means showing faith in employees, propitiating them, engaging them, enriching them, and shaping their attitudes<sup>17</sup>. Through their enthusiastic actions, a culture of success and perseverance is shaped in the organization. Stimulating and inspiring are most often achieved by appealing to various types of needs and strengthening the desire to meet them. During the COVID-19 pandemic, these elements were usually fulfilled by redefining the organization’s mission and a new vision of its functioning. These elements must be appropriately adapted to the employees of a given organization. A leader cannot ignore the need for recognition, greater responsibility and influence, achievements or the need for self-fulfillment that are alive among his employees.

In the context of self-fulfillment and the related process of self-improvement,

leadership should aim at intellectual stimulation, understood, among others, as enriching and shaping others through interactions focused on learning from each other and transfer of knowledge and experience. The essential element here is an appropriate organizational culture based on mutual trust and improvement. Employees with the sense of leadership should be willing to develop the competences of others, what is closely related to building commitment and atmosphere conducive to changes for good done by leaders. Moreover, it is associated with the progress of system thinking, including, among others, the good of entire organization. Leadership is also about bringing people together, gaining their trust and making people want to unite and get involved. This is closely related to the vision and development of a strategy that directs the energy of the entire team and facilitates increased concentration on the assumed goals. During the COVID-19 pandemic, it is the appropriate expenditure of energy in the organization, not time management, that has become the focus of attention, because „the richest, happiest and most productive life is characterized by the ability to fully engage in the current challenge, but also to periodically break away from it and the search for renewal”<sup>18</sup>. The COVID-19 pandemic was undoubtedly a phenomenon that had a destructive impact on work psychology. Leadership during the pandemic was focused mainly on the development

16 J. M. Burns, *Leadership*, New York 1978, p. 46.

17 J. Kotter, *Leading Change*, Boston 1996, p. 7-10.

18 J. Loehr, T. Schwartz, *The Power of Full Engagement: Managing Energy, Not Time, Is the Key to High Performance and Personal Renewal*, The Free Press 2003, p. 12.

of employees' intellectual capital in a mobilizing and integrating way. The vision of success created by the leader is an important support for the actions and efforts undertaken by employees to achieve goals and meet challenges. Transformational leadership particularly requires that the vision takes into account the interests of the organization's participants, is understood by them and, preferably, created by them, so that their motivation will always be stronger. In this context, extensive team communication and extensive cooperation between group members are necessary, which includes not only dialogue on developing common goals, understanding their importance for themselves and the organization, but also communicating their own passions and values. This allows better mutual understanding of each other and more effective cooperation in achieving goals and enriching each other.

Even the type of leadership that seems to require the highest level of leader awareness may manifest itself naturally, regardless of the formal higher position in relation to other team or group participants. The basis for the initiation and development of transformational leadership is the leader's emotional intelligence, enabling him to find and strengthen bonds with the group. This symbiotic interaction occurs when positive emotions emerge, which are then developed and expressed through enthusiasm, determination, zeal, or passion. Achieving harmony

and consonance between the leader and the group result from the leader's highly developed emotional intelligence, which is the key to effective and efficient leadership<sup>19</sup>.

Good transformational leadership also requires special social competences, related primarily to communication, but also to appropriate social sensitivity. It is worth noting that a true leader also plays the role of a mentor, which means that he does not seek to lead others. However, he dynamizes the development process of others, inspiring and activating intrinsic motivation to achieve set goals. One of his main tasks is to create an appropriate atmosphere that makes the employee strive to take up new challenges, despite internal doubts or fears. Observing a true leader in action stimulates the intrinsic motivation to become equally independent, active, and enthusiastic about one's endeavors. Moreover, it is necessary for the leader to present to employees the connection between their work and the company's mission and goal<sup>20</sup>. In this case, the leader does not strive for commands and prohibitions, but for effective partnership in achieving goals. Leadership aims to accelerate changes taking place within the organization. It activates various needs and ambitions in people and has a positive effect on their motivation. It stimulates action, strengthens and tightens the bonds of cooperation, appreciates, and rewards the contribution made and taking one's own initiative. Transformational leadership does not accept the status quo

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19 D. Goleman, R. Boyatzis, A. McKee, *Primal Leadership: Realizing the Power of Emotional Intelligence*, Boston 2002, p. 14.  
20 K. Murray, *Communicate to Inspire. A guide for leaders*, Warsaw 2014, p. 40.



but emphasizes the role of striving for positive changes as well as pays great attention to vision, values, and motivation<sup>21</sup>. The basic area of influence of leadership on individuals includes cooperation, communication, taking care of the atmosphere between group participants and striving to achieve the set goal together. The purpose of leadership understood in this way is for the leader to play three basic roles: recognizing the need for change, creating a new vision, institutionalizing the change<sup>22</sup>.

## Summary

During the COVID-19 epidemic, organizations, in fact, had no influence on eliminating the phenomenon in the long-term perspective. Therefore, current activity meant shaping a specific profile of adaptation to the current situation, doing it in a reactive, sometimes revolutionary way. This resulted basically from the nature of the phenomenon itself and the diversity of reactions of the authorities of individual state entities. It should be emphasized that in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic, many organizations chose the defensive option, trying not to give way to their competitors and to protect their own organization against the negative impact of the epidemic situation (56%). However, a large part of the organization (26%) chose the offensive variant, introducing innovations and breakthrough solutions

intended to change the competition system<sup>23</sup>. Therefore, it will not be surprising that, in fact, the most appropriate leadership style in times of great turmoil turned out to be transformational leadership. To sum up, it should be said that an organization, that wants to survive a period of crisis and compete with others, must find a way to engage the minds of almost every employee and that is why it is necessary to place great emphasis on the selection, development, and maintenance of strong leaders at every level of the organization<sup>24</sup>.

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21 Ibidem.

22 N. M. Tichy, M. A. Devanna, *The Transformational Leader*, “Training & Development Journal” 1986, No. 40, p. 2732.

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24 B. Minchington, *Role of leadership in employer branding*, “HR FUTURE” 2011, No. 7, p. 16.



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