LEADERSHIP IN CRISIS CONDITIONS ON THE EXAMPLE OF PUBLIC ORGANIZATIONS

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Purpose: The purpose of this article is to analyze and present the conclusions of the research conducted on leadership and the qualities of a leader that were expected by public sector employees to those who lead their organizations under crisis conditions.

Design/methodology/approach: For the purpose of the article, the authors attempted to synthesize views on leadership and the characteristics of a leader. Conducted in 2022 among employees of the public sector, the empirical research using the method of structured interviews was used to analyze attitudes in a crisis situation among managers of public institutions located in Lubuskie and West Pomerania.

Findings: The results of the research made it possible to determine the leadership qualities expected by employees of public entities toward management during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research limitations/implications: The analysis presented is not comprehensive, due to the multifaceted nature of the leadership issue. The presented conclusions may provide important information for further research into the issue at hand.

Practical implications: The analysis of the research results made it possible to indicate which leadership competencies should be improved by managers employed in the studied public entities. The presented research results can become a guideline for managers employed in other public organizations, as well as private entities.

Originality/value: The value of the research conducted lies in identifying key leadership qualities that, in the opinion of subordinates, were felt to be in short supply, particularly noticeable during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: leadership, leadership theories, leadership qualities.

Category of the paper: research paper.

1. Introduction

Dynamic changes in the environment, increasingly causing crisis phenomena, lead to a modification of the perception of the role of the leader in modern organizations. It turns out that the conduct of the leader often becomes a condition for the survival of the organization and

determines its chances of future development (Adair, 2000). Awareness of the inevitability and diversity of crises occurring in the modern environment makes the selection of the right leader with certain characteristics significantly affect the future fate of many organizations. Crisis situations are encountered when, as a result of external or internal circumstances, there is an imbalance of functioning, or even a loss of control over the development of the situation and the emergence of an unacceptable level of threat to the interests and objectives of the entity under consideration, which triggers the need to take extraordinary measures to return to a state of equilibrium (Sobolewski, 2012). A crisis is "the culminating phase of an escalating crisis situation, arising as a result of unexpected circumstances, ineffective countermeasures, resulting in a loss of control over the situation and a lack of concepts for its control" (Zdrodowski, 2014).

The success of anti-crisis activities depends largely on the ability to process knowledge about specific conditions, circumstances, and modes of action, as well as the ability to "anticipate, infer, and design changes according to indications of knowledge about relationships between events and between sets of events of particular categories of knowledge both possessed and yet to be acquired" (Zdrodowski, 2014). In practice, crisis management takes place under intense time pressure, which usually results in paying attention to the present and immediate future instead of long-term problems. In addition, the need for rapid decision-making goes hand in hand with a deterioration in the ability of managers to correctly assess the consequences of a given decision, making it difficult to conduct the recovery process (Slatter, Lovett, 2001). In this context, the leadership qualities that an organization's leaders should possess and their ability to cope with crisis conditions become particularly important.

2. Leadership and characteristics of a leader - theoretical context

Precisely defining leadership is not an easy or straightforward task, as the meaning of the term for many researchers turns out to be varied. Leadership is sometimes equated with a combination of specific character traits and talents that allow a leader to persuade other people to carry out specific actions. The strength of the interpersonal relationship occurring between the leader and the others is an instrument for achieving goals, not through coercion or pressure, but through persuasion and arousing motivation (Bass, 1990; Griffin, 2002). In the opinion of many researchers, leaders should be a reflection of the qualities expected by colleagues or the organization, which makes leadership not a unilateral influence but a confrontation characterized by full interactivity. Leadership takes place in a group environment, in which potential followers are subjected to the influence of the leader, with the size of the group being of secondary importance, since leadership processes can occur in a small team as well as the entire organization. However, the task of the leader remains to initiate and sustain relationships,

create channels of communication and maintain bonds, leading to cohesive, effective and goal-oriented teams (Hogan et al., 1994; Hughes et al., 2006). In this context, leadership can be understood as the ability to use the potential inherent in co-workers, developing their knowledge and talents to achieve the organization's goals (Lambert, 1999). Thus, a leader must be aware of the need to create conditions that stimulate the development of employees' creativity and their skills (Skrzypek, 2000).

Research on leadership conducted by W. G. Bennis and B. Nanus made it possible to identify the most characteristic traits of a leader, which turned out to be the ability to create a vision combined with the ability to communicate this vision in a way that is understandable to others, as well as consistency and honesty towards tasks and people, and awareness of one's own strengths and weaknesses (Bennis, Bennis, 1985). In turn, on the basis of observations conducted by J. Adair, it was established that a leader is characterized by: enthusiasm, integrity, firmness, fairness, cordiality, humility, self-confidence (Adair, 2003). According to research conducted by J. Collins, the most effective leaders are characterized by a specific personality, combining modesty and willpower, meekness and consistency, timidity and steadfastness. In his assessment, five degrees of leadership can be identified. The lowest degree is a very capable employee who, using his knowledge, skills and talent, contributes to the company's performance. Grade two is a valuable team member, able to work effectively with others and contribute to the team's tasks. Grade three means a competent manager who can organize people and resources to carry out tasks effectively. Degree four means an effective leader, i.e. one who stimulates and reinforces commitment to a specific vision and the pursuit of its realization, and stimulates the team to work at a high level. Grade five the highest denotes a leader capable of achieving long-term success through a unique combination of personal humility and modesty with professional decisiveness and courage (Collins, 2001).

An original concept of leadership, relating to the issue of succession and the related promotion of a person to a leadership position, was developed by M.D. Watkins, pointing out the seven changes required when taking a leadership position. According to M.D. Watkins, the process of change leading to leadership is as follows (Watkins, 2012): Specialist > A detail-oriented person of the various departments of the organization > Integration of collective knowledge and ability to work out compromises > Deductive reasoning > Increased effectiveness through analysis of the organization's systems > Perception of issues important to the organization > Diplomat shaping personality > Personal role model. However, there is no iron rule by which leadership can be formed. As W. Aftyka notes, leadership can be achieved through various ways, and its measure can sometimes be the success achieved by a person (Aftyka, 2014). At least four such paths can be distinguished in the public sphere. "The first is the sphere of political institutions, the motherland of political leadership. From the point of view of the processes of governance in a democratic state, the most important thing here is to be equipped with a democratic mandate. The second (...) is organizational leadership in the broader public administration. In this case, the formal basis for the performance of leadership

functions is more diverse - in addition to the democratic mandate, it can be specialized qualifications, bureaucratic promotion or political patronage. The third (...) is the leadership of non-governmental organizations working to advance the public interest. As the last (...) indicate international and supranational organizations of various types" (Szczupaczinski, 2014). Leadership in public administration is worth considering on four levels, analyzing: (1) organizational processes of transforming resources into results characteristic of administration (public goods), (2) adaptive changes that adjust administration to changing conditions, (3) creation of its cultural identity, (4) definition of goals and conditions for their implementation (Szczupaczyński, 2014) - see Table 1.

Table 1.
Planes of analysis for leadership in public administration

The planes of leadership analysis	Internal aspects	External aspects
I. Processes of transforming resources into results specific to public administration	• Motivating employees • Setting performance standards • Creating an organizational bond	• Leadership as part of building the desired image of the office as an employer • Activities to maximize the budget
II. Adaptive changes that adapt administration to operating conditions	• Designing and communicating change, overcoming resistance to change • Inspiring and structuring organizational learning processes • Restructuring organizational resources	• Seeking external support for change and obtaining necessary resources • Representing organizational interests to policy makers
III. Creation of cultural identity of public administration	• Interpretation of mission-related values and standards • Strengthening the ethos of a public administration official • Building organizational symbolism	• External activities aimed at strengthening the social legitimacy of the administration • Cooperation with institutions and bodies that influence the public perception of public administration and its cultural identity (media, educational institutions that educate administration personnel, etc.).
IV. Setting goals and shaping the conditions for their implementation	• Interpretation of the goals set for public administration by the environment	• Formal and informal interactions with the public in the process of shaping public policies and objectives pursued by the administration • Influencing public opinion to gain support for specific policies and projects • Building strategic alliances and cooperative relationships (with NGOs, business, political parties, etc.)

Source: Szczupaczyński, 2014.

The presented planes and aspects, as well as attributes and characteristics of leadership served as the basis for formulating and concretizing the scope of the study of the issue of leadership in public entities under the conditions of the crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

3. Research methodology and results

Leadership capabilities are undoubtedly one of the key factors in coping with threats to the organization, so the authors' research aimed to answer the question: in connection with the emergency situation caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, did leadership qualities expected by subordinates become apparent in the management of public entities?

The first stage of the research was a theoretical analysis of the concepts under study and a review of the literature on the role and importance of leadership, with a particular focus on public organisations. The analysis was carried out using the available publications and involved operationalising the relevant concepts related to leadership. The research used the method of purposive selection. It is the most typical case of non-random selection and involves the completely subjective selection of the surveyed units for the sample, in order to obtain the broadest and most complete information. The assumptions of the survey assumed that it would include officials of local government units of different sizes (both municipal and city offices) and offices subordinate to the government administration. The study conducted by the authors took place in the autumn of 2022 and included 36 respondents, employed in clerical positions, representing 14 public entities (11 local government units and 3 public institutions subordinate to government administration) located in Lubuskie and Zachodniopomorskie Voivodeships. The research method used was a structured interview conducted by telephone with a respondent who had a minimum of 3 years of seniority in the institution. The requirement for a minimum length of service was based on the respondent's need to compare the leadership qualities noted in superiors before and after the pandemic. As a result of the survey, it was possible to:

- determine what qualities respondents believe a true leader should possess;
- to learn the opinion of respondents about the intensity of a given trait in the head of the unit and the direct superior of the person under study both before the pandemic and currently;
- to learn the opinion of respondents about the skills of the unit manager and direct supervisor of the surveyed persons related to selected aspects of leadership in public administration, presented in Table 1.

Based on the results of the survey, a list was created of the qualities most often indicated by respondents that a leader should have. In addition, it was possible to determine to what extent, according to the respondents, each trait is possessed by their direct superiors and managers of individual offices (Table 2). When comparing the qualities that the respondents expect from a leader and those that they see in reality in their direct superiors and the head of the office, one can see considerable discrepancies. The biggest differences were noted for qualities such as charisma and the ability to admit mistakes. Among other qualities lacking in direct superiors and office managers, respondents indicated: the ability to make the right decisions, being an example, self-confidence, and objectivity/fairness. The survey also revealed the existence of

differences in the possession of leadership qualities between the head of the unit and the direct supervisor of the people surveyed. The largest disparities occurred in such qualities as listening skills, communication skills, and competence.

Table 2.
Leadership qualities and their occurrence as assessed by the surveyed individuals

Trait desirable in a leader to a very high or high degree	Percentage indications by respondents	Trait present in immediate supervisor [%]	Trait present in the office manager [%]
Self-confidence	88,9	52,8	58,3
Being an example	86,1	44,4	36,1
Ability to make the right decisions	86,1	33,3	38,9
Competence	83,3	77,8	61,1
Charisma	83,3	2,8	5,6
Communicativeness	77,8	47,2	63,9
Ability to listen	75,0	63,9	38,9
Ability to admit when you are wrong	75,0	22,2	16,7
Objectivity	72,2	44,4	41,7
Consistency	66,7	52,8	61,1
Ability to persuade	58,3	50,0	44,4
Firmness	58,3	75,0	80,6
Patience	55,6	44,4	38,9
Courage	52,8	41,7	44,4
Intelligence	52,8	52,8	47,2
Creativity	50,0	33,3	52,8

Source: own study based on research results.

Based on the research, an attempt was also made to verify the hypothesis that crisis management, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, would affect the visibility of desirable qualities in a leader among office managers. However, the data in Table 3 shows that such a situation did not occur. To a small extent, positive changes were noted for such qualities as communicativeness and consistency. For the rest, there were no significant changes, which means that functioning in the era of pandemonium, did not result in significant differences in the occurrence of the qualities of a good leader among office managers and direct supervisors of the people surveyed. Table 3 indicates a certain persistence in the level of occurrence of certain traits perceived in managers, despite the functioning of offices and the way their work is organized for a long time under conditions far from standard.

Table 3.
Leadership traits and their occurrence before and after the Covid-19 pandemic as assessed by the people surveyed

Trait desirable in a leader to a very high or high degree	The presence of the trait in the immediate supervisor		Occurrence of the trait in the head of the office	
	before the Covid-19 pandemic [%]	currently [%]	before the Covid-19 pandemic [%]	currently [%]
Self-confidence	55,6	52,8	52,8	58,3
Being an example	47,2	44,4	33,3	36,1
Ability to make the right decisions	30,6	33,3	44,4	38,9
Competence	77,8	77,8	63,9	61,1

Cont. table 3.

Charisma	2,8	2,8	5,6	5,8
Communicativeness	36,1	47,2	52,8	63,9
Ability to listen	61,1	63,9	41,7	38,9
Ability to admit when you are wrong	25,0	22,2	13,9	16,7
Objectivity	47,2	44,4	36,1	41,7
Consistency	44,4	55,6	55,6	63,9
Ability to persuade	47,2	50,0	47,2	44,4
Firmness	72,2	75,0	80,6	80,6
Patience	38,9	44,4	41,7	38,9
Courage	41,7	41,7	47,2	44,4
Intelligence	52,8	52,8	50,0	47,2
Creativity	41,7	33,3	47,2	41,7

Source: own study based on research results.

The planes of analysis of leadership in public administration presented in Table 1 were used to formulate queries to respondents about differences in attitudes in the head of the unit and the direct supervisor of the person under study. An aggregate summary of the responses obtained relating to both internal and external aspects of leadership in public administration is presented in Table 4. The data in Table 4 shows that the changes in the attitudes of superiors observed by the respondents are small. According to the respondents, they perceive the greatest differences with regard to the increase in leadership skills in a crisis situation. The observed change can be explained by the fact that the pandemic period was fraught with many emergency situations, which may have contributed to an increase in the competence of office managers to deal with crisis situations. A positive change, albeit very small, was also perceived by respondents in the category of interpreter of goals and tasks carried out for the benefit of the environment, which can be explained in the same way as in the case of crisis management. No clear changes were observed with regard to the other aspects studied.

Table 4.
Differences in attitudes before and after the Covid-19 pandemic as assessed by the people surveyed

Specification	Occurrence of a given attitude before the pandemic (on a scale of 1-10)		Occurrence of a given attitude after a pandemic (on a scale of 1-10)		Change	
	Immediate supervisor	Office manager	Immediate supervisor	Office manager	Immediate supervisor	Office manager
Inspirer for action	6,3	5,2	6,0	5,4	-0,3	0,2
Creator of the image of the office as an employer	6,1	4,9	6,2	4,8	0,1	-0,1
Leadership skills in a crisis situation	4,7	5,0	5,2	5,4	0,5	0,4
Representative of organizational interests	6,8	4,6	7,1	4,5	0,3	-0,1
Creator of the ethos of a public administration official	3,8	4,0	3,6	4,1	-0,2	0,1
Creator of the image of the office in the immediate environment	5,1	5,7	5,0	5,9	-0,1	0,2

Cont. table 4.

Interpreter of goals and objectives implemented for the benefit of the environment	5,2	5,8	5,6	6,1	0,4	0,3
Implementer of tasks and objectives performed by the office	6,6	7,1	6,4	7,4	-0,2	0,3

Source: own study based on research results.

4. Conclusions and implications

The research conducted has established that:

1. Surveyed officials most often point to: self-confidence, being an example, the ability to make the right decisions, competence, charisma as qualities that a true leader should have. Charisma and the ability to admit mistakes are, in the opinion of respondents, the most deficient qualities of a direct supervisor and office manager. Large deficiencies were also observed in the case of: ability to make the right decisions, to be an example, self-confidence, and objectivity.

2. The period of the Covid-19 pandemic did not significantly change the intensity of the leadership qualities observed in office managers and direct supervisors of the surveyed individuals. There was a slight positive change in such traits as communicativeness and consistency. There was a slight regression in the case of creativity. The observed changes can be explained by the need to comply with pandemic procedures set by superior authorities.

3. The changes related to various aspects of leadership in public administration, as expressed in the attitudes of superiors, which were observed by the respondents are small and concern only two areas: the ability to lead in a crisis situation and the interpretation of goals and tasks carried out for the benefit of the environment.

In conclusion, it should be noted that the period of the Covid-19 pandemic had little effect on the prominence of leadership qualities and attitudes among office managers and direct supervisors of the people surveyed. Although the recorded changes were a consequence of functioning under crisis conditions caused by the pandemic, their scope and magnitude should be considered symbolic. The perceived deficit of many key leadership qualities, has not been filled at all or to a very small extent. The reasons for this can be traced to the specific factor responsible for the crisis, which was the pandemic, and the model for countering its effects developed and implemented from the top down, which naturally necessitated the application of accepted procedures and the adoption of certain attitudes, especially in public sector entities. However, the adopted model for combating the pandemic and the accompanying procedures do not explain such deficits in the expected qualities of a good leader, such as the ability to admit

error, objectivity, and being an example. These are attributes that undoubtedly need to be improved by many office managers and direct supervisors of the people surveyed.

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