

THE ROLE OF CRISIS LEADERSHIP IN IMPROVING ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AMONG KWAZULU-NATAL CHRISTIAN BUSINESS LEADERS

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Abstract

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The study wants to know how Christian business leaders navigated the difficult and uncertain times of COVID-19 so that their companies thrived, retained their employees, and continued to operate successfully during a global economic crisis. This study employs an approach that combines quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitative methodology is used to gather demographic data about study participants, a qualitative methodology is used since the goal of the study is to explore the range of opinions. The findings of this study ascertained that Christian leaders who demonstrated high levels of resilience were able to survive and, in some cases, thrive during the COVID-19 crisis. Leaders who demonstrated resilience and a positive outlook could increase the level of resilience in their followers, allowing them to survive the crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic has also brought attention to the necessity of situational analysis in dealing with and resolving a crisis. Conscious of the COVID-19 situation and guided by the contingency theory, Christian business leadership had to unlearn old habits and adjust to new ways of operating. This research is a new investigation into the ability of Christian business leaders to navigate through the turbulent times of COVID-19 so that their businesses and their followers can survive and prosper.

Keywords: Christian Business Leader, Crisis Leadership, Management, Entrepreneurship, Organisational Culture

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1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has put business owners and leaders all over the world to the test, and this is especially true for Christian business leaders whose

spiritual lives are fully integrated with their professional lives (Anderson et al., 2021). Christian business leaders face the difficult task of making difficult management decisions in uncertain times while remaining true to their Christian values

as a result of their responsibilities. It is their responsibility to ensure that their businesses remain profitable and resilient (Umair et al., 2021; Maak et al., 2021). The main goal of the study is to understand how Christian business leaders overcame the difficult and unsettling COVID-19 pandemic so that their organisations flourished, kept their employees, and carried on with successful operations in the midst of a severe financial crisis. The primary research question for the study is:

RQ: How did Christian business leaders deal with the uncertain times of COVID-19 so that their organisations and the people they lead continued to flourish?

Although the field of business leadership in crises has been extensively studied, there has not been much empirical research on the subject that examines Christian business leaders' responses to the current crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (Guzman et al., 2020; Tourish, 2020). By examining the various strategies used by Christian business leaders to deal with the COVID-19 crisis and maintain the success of their enterprises, this study aims to close this knowledge gap. Few empirical studies, however, have examined the extent to which Christian business leaders can function as effective leaders during unsettling times of crisis like COVID-19 (Anderson et al., 2021; Umair et al., 2021). They may be able to manage better their staff and satisfy customer expectations if they are aware of the role, they play in keeping their businesses thriving. This knowledge is a developmental asset that can be used to create leadership interventions and responses that will help businesses succeed after COVID-19.

Since the aim of the study is to investigate the variety of viewpoints and the various ways the problem is portrayed, a qualitative research approach is used in this study. Quantitative research methods have also been used to gather demographic information from study participants (Bryman, 2017). Key informant interview techniques were used to purposely collect data from 100 Christian business leaders who participated in this study. A thematic data analysis was used to analyse and explore specific themes and individual views and experiences of the respondents. This study point to Christian leaders who demonstrate high levels of resilience to be able to survive and, in some cases, thrive during the COVID-19 crisis. Leaders who demonstrate resilience and a positive outlook would be able to increase the level of resilience in their followers, allowing them to survive the crisis. Overcoming the complexities and uncertainties of the post-pandemic era necessitates a redesign of the "next normal", which necessitates adaptability to ongoing uncertainty and change (Portuguez Castro & Gómez Zermeño, 2021). Limitations may result from unforeseen problems associated with the sampling, the measures, the treatment, the data analyses, and the execution of the procedures.

This paper has the following structure. The context of the study, the research problem, the objectives, and the research question are all presented in Section 1. In Section 2, the pertinent literature is reviewed. The methodology that was employed to conduct the empirical research is examined in Section 3. The data gathered and analysed are presented in Section 4 along with an overview of the analysis method used. The study's findings are discussed in Section 5.

Section 6 summarises the important conclusions and recommendations resulting from the study's findings.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Crisis leadership

According to Mikusova and Horvathova (2019), an organisational crisis is a low-probability, high-impact event characterised by ambiguity in terms of its cause, effect, and means of resolution that threatens the viability of an organisation and calls for swift decisions. Canyon (2020) defines it as an uncertain situation possessing latent risks and opportunities that must be resolved within a given timeframe. Crises are sudden catastrophic or evolving changes that result in an urgent problem with the potential to cause damage to a business organisation's reputation, employees, or profitability.

Crises are a combined product of unfamiliar events and shared perceptions that something is seriously wrong. However, the members of a community are unlikely to share the perceptions of a set of events as a crisis; people and societies experience different types of disturbances differently and have different levels of vulnerability and resilience (Firestone, 2020). Common terms associated with the two modes of the definition include uncertainty, ambiguity, unpredictability, instability, surprise element, and danger, with grave consequences for organisational viability. Likewise, both definitions highlight the need for an urgent response to crises. Thus, while they are part of the human conditions, their effects can be minimised through crisis leadership and management. Indeed, disparities in perceptions of what constitutes a crisis set the stage for crisis leadership to unfold.

The term "leadership" is also ambiguous due to its origins in the common vocabulary, Gandolfi and Stone (2018) asserts that leadership involves a combination of five components, namely, a leader(s), followers, legitimate action, a course of action, and collective goals. Thus, leadership can be defined as the capacity of an individual to perceive important issues, construct a mission/vision, discern necessary means, make critical decisions, influence followers, and successfully complete the mission (Canyon, 2020). Whereas a leader is one or more individuals who choose, provide for, develop, and influence one or more followers who have a variety of talents, skills, and abilities and focus the followers on the organization's mission and goals, inspiring the followers to expand spiritual, emotional, and physical energy willingly and enthusiastically in a concerted coordinated effort to accomplish the organisation's goals (Poturak et al., 2020).

These definitions highlight that leadership is a multi-dimensional concept and that a leader is a multi-talented individual. Leadership is a complex concept and leaders are embedded in a complex environment where crises occur (Northouse, 2021). Therefore, crisis leadership requires a deep understanding of the role of people in the ultimate success of an organization's vision and mission (Gandolfi & Stone, 2018). This perspective shifts the concept of leadership from a theoretical to a more practical space with tangible outcomes,

providing room to explore leadership styles. As noted previously, leadership plays a critical role in enabling an organization to deal with and alleviate the consequences of a crisis. According to Canyon (2020), a person's worldview influences how he/she defines, comprehends, and responds to a crisis. This is a two-way association: first, perceptions of a crisis are grounded on a leader's worldview, and second, the leader's perception that it will become a reality influences the action to be taken (Firestone, 2020).

2.2. Christian business leadership

To comprehend Christian business leadership's impact on an organization's character in times of crisis, it is necessary to first understand what Christianity implies. According to Firestone (2020), Christianity is a way of life that embraces Christian culture. Core to the Christian life is God's love, redemption, and victory by Jesus Christ through His death on the cross. Christianity implies God's grace over humanity and His attempt to reach them, rather than people's attempts to reach God (Angelo, 2018; Firestone, 2020). Christianity advocates the "Be Good, Do Good" mentality, which through the gospel obligates Christians to love one another and create communities of "living" as opposed to "good" people (Firestone, 2020). Christian business leaders draw their leadership values and guidance from the Bible which sets out the principles and guidance for Christian life. It calls on Christians to regard a crisis as only one part of the time of their life on earth, leading to ultimate salvation and entry to God's kingdom. This significantly influences Christian leaders and their followers' characters and behaviour in a crisis (Firestone, 2020; Gandolfi & Stone, 2018).

2.3. Factors of successful Christian business leadership in a crisis

Generally, success reflects the achievement of intended goals and objectives in whatever sector, and success and failure are two key terms in management, they interpret and measure good or indifferent management. Mostly, success refers to a firm's financial performance (Firestone, 2020; Gandolfi & Stone, 2018; Bamata & Phiri, 2022). According to Gandolfi and Stone (2018), the factors of business success, also called "key success factors" (KSFs) or "key result areas" (KRAs), are the areas that the entrepreneur must take into consideration to ensure the success of a business.

2.3.1. Love, compassion, modesty, and care

Christian leaders are thus, called on to be driven by the love of God, humility, and compassion for others in all that they do. This inspires their followers to work towards a collective goal. During the global COVID-19 crisis, love, compassion, and care emerged as strong leadership characteristics that enabled Christian businesses to survive. Apart from strong decisive leadership, the pandemic highlighted the need for self-awareness, love, empathy, vulnerability, compassion, self-awareness, and agility (Nielsen et al., 2020; Megheirkouni & Mejheirkouni, 2020). Emotional empathy emerged as an important

leadership quality to ease the suffering and losses experienced (Nielsen et al., 2020; Lawton-Misra & Pretorius, 2021; Megheirkouni & Mejheirkouni, 2020). Indeed, modern theories of business leadership acknowledge these characteristics, among others, as critical factors for effective leadership during a crisis (Megheirkouni & Mejheirkouni, 2020). Leaders require strong interpersonal skills during the pandemic to respond to their followers' emotional needs while simultaneously dealing with their own grief and emotions. As Jones (2021) notes, these traits embody the Christian values of loving one's neighbor, putting others' interests first, empathy, living for one another, and demonstrating the gifts of the Spirit.

2.3.2. Adaptiveness, resilience, and courage

Christian leadership emphasizes the importance of self-development, courage, and resilience in times of crisis. Like Jesus who constantly slipped away to spend time with God, Christian leaders are called on to enrich their knowledge of God and the world in order to circumvent and/or adapt to challenging situations (Gandolfi & Stone, 2018).

Moreover, leaders require courage during difficult times. A striking example is when Jesus prayed in the garden at Gethsemane before being arrested and crucified. The Bible notes that Jesus knew all things that would come upon Him (Firestone, 2020), including His arrest, the painful lashing, and the ultimate shameful crucifixion.

2.3.3. Integrity, motivation, and correction

Good leaders value and practice integrity, which involves being honest and having strong moral principles or consistently upholding one's beliefs and position even when under attack. This is a critical factor for effective crisis leadership (Gopichandran, 2021; Nayak & Sarukkai, 2014). Decisiveness, that is, making a decision whether wrong or right, is also very important in times of crisis. Gopichandran (2021) notes that people do not follow leaders that lack integrity, but those who practice what they believe and preach, are consistent and dependable, and do what they said they will do. Followers tend to be inspired by those who uphold values that others can trust. God is dependable; thus, all Christians are called on to be dependable and trustworthy.

Moreover, instead of misleading or taking advantage of people, good leaders inspire and motivate others to do what needs to be done. Christian leaders correct others in the right way by understanding their temperament, respecting their concerns, acknowledging and believing in others' gifts, supporting their dreams, and challenging their flaws. In a crisis, a leader's task is to provide guidance and influence followers. For instance, in responding to the COVID-19 crisis, Christian leadership has been instrumental in influencing and providing guidance to their communities and the population at large. Christian leaders assumed various roles, including acting as role models to inspire integrity, as communicators to pass on official information and address misinformation within their communities, and as motivators to urge their communities to obey rules and regulations (Newport, 2020; Pflieger, 2021; Plüss, 2020).

2.3.4. Consultation and collaboration

Bureaucratic hierarchies may collapse in the turbulent, complex environment triggered by crises. This calls for a shift in the understanding of effective crisis leadership from the lone leader to collective leadership (Plüss, 2020). Major crises like the COVID-19 pandemic require leaders to relinquish their power and control (Beghetto, 2021; Lawton-Misra & Pretorius, 2021). Thus, modern crisis leadership emphasizes a people-focused perspective where emotional empathy acts as a catalyst, and traits like empathy, love, compassion, respect, emotional well-being, human safety first, teamwork, and integrity are essential values (Dirani et al., 2020).

2.4. Organisational culture

Organisational culture is broadly defined as the shared values, beliefs, expectations, identities, meanings (interpretation of significant events), and practices that guide and inform the actions of all team members within the organisation (Akanji et al., 2020; Tortorella et al., 2021). Therefore, organizational culture plays an instrumental role in crisis leadership and vice versa. On the one hand, it influences the organizational worldview by imparting collective values, interpretations, and expectations, among other things (Ehrenmüller, 2021; Firestone, 2020). In so doing, organizational cultures sets the context for how crises are viewed, their severity is perceived, and the organization's response. On the other hand, leadership plays an integral role in cultivating organizational culture (Akanji et al., 2019; Kargas & Varoutas, 2015). Alvesson (2020) posits that leaders are visionary individuals who tend to inculcate certain values, aspirations, and traits and thus inspire and motivate their followers toward achieving a collective goal.

The Bible provides a foundation for how crises should be viewed and ultimately defined. It is replete with stories of people and groups in crisis. Specific examples are given of Moses' crisis leadership. The Bible preaches that a crisis is sent by God, and if one follows God's way, He will assist one in responding. It encourages Christians to regard a crisis as only one part of their time on earth leading to ultimate salvation and entry to God's never-ending kingdom (Miller, 1998). From a crisis leadership perspective, it offers hope and forward-thinking, with God being in control during a crisis. Thus, crisis leadership is crucial in attracting, inspiring, and ultimately retaining as much talent as possible during and after a crisis (Alvesson, 2020). Traversing a crisis without clear plans, foresight and leadership could cause an organization to collapse (Alvesson, 2020; Ehrenmüller, 2021; Gandolfi & Stone, 2018).

2.5. Sustaining an impactful organisational culture

Culture refers to unwritten rules that enable new members to adapt to the organization, and the organization to adapt to the internal and external environment, compete and gain control of the environment. According to Ozgenel (2020), organizational culture emerges from complex, constant interaction among members of the organization. It highlights what is of value to

members and orchestrates how they should feel, think, and behave. Organisational culture represents the values, behaviour, habits, and beliefs that shape individual members' behaviour. It is the shared learning in relation to the behavioural and cognitive elements of the group and its beliefs that develop over time and assumes certain patterns. Culture enables leaders to identify behaviour that should be modelled and to teach their followers to emulate such (Khan et al., 2020). The inclusion of morally binding value systems such as religion — or in a broader sense, spirituality — influences the organizational culture and alters decision-making and behaviour. Spiritual leadership integrates qualities that are fundamental to Christian principles, and hence, has the potential to provide the basis for a comprehensive crisis leadership model.

According to Islam et al. (2021), under normal circumstances, as well as in crisis mode, Christian leaders are called on to ensure constant re-connection with their followers at both the professional and emotional levels to build trust, care and compassion, a necessary bond for collective goal achievement. As Greene et al. (2020) note, among other things, Christian organisations that survived the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic were in constant communication with their followers on platforms such as phones, YouTube channels, and social media. To sustain an impactful organisational culture, Christian leaders are called on to ensure that Christian values are an integral part of their organisations by adhering to such values in leading through decision-making while being compassionate and empathetic to their followers.

Christian leaders influence the organisational culture (Firestone, 2020; Gandolfi & Stone, 2018; Islam et al., 2021) by introducing beliefs and values that are different from established crisis leadership styles (Gandolfi & Stone, 2018). They thus, build a culture that is specific to the organization (Khan et al., 2020). The literature highlights the benefits of a Christian leadership perspective while suggesting that crisis situations should be embraced because of the opportunities they present (Alvesson, 2020; Nielsen et al., 2020; Firestone, 2020). In particular, there is a strong relationship between Christian qualities such as love, compassion, empathy, being truthful and sensitive to the environment and God, and the organisational culture and effective crisis leadership. Christian leadership behaviour has been found to influence the creation of an organisational culture that carries an organisation through a crisis (Nielsen et al., 2020). This suggests that Christian values should be incorporated in crisis leadership in the future and that organizations should be encouraged to embrace the potential offered by a crisis.

2.6. Theoretical framework

2.6.1. The resilience and contingency theories

The origins of the resilience theory lie in the study of adversity and adverse life experiences' harmful impact on people. The theory, which has its roots in child psychology, holds that one or more protective factors can help individuals to survive in adverse conditions with less harm (Chadwick & Raver, 2020). There is no consensus on the definition of the term

resilience (Van Breda, 2018). According to Van Breda (2018), some scholars define resilience as something intrinsic to individuals, while others refer to it in a holistic sense. It has also been described as a positive attitude that enables one to operate in times of adversity. The growing positive psychology movement posits that resilience is something quite ordinary and common that every individual has the capacity to cultivate and call upon in times of crisis or trauma. Moreover, researchers have established that such capacity can be developed and cultivated in individuals to enhance their chances of coping with the demands of adversity and rebound from it (Eliot, 2020). In simple terms, resilience implies a mediating process that entails the capacity to rebound or adjust well to significant adversity. Van Breda (2018) defines it as the multilevel processes that systems engage in to obtain better-than-expected outcomes in the face or wake of adversity. "Multilevel" means that the resilience processes occur across multiple domains or levels of the social ecology or person-in-environment, rather than only in the individual.

Resilience is thus a dynamic process that draws on an individual's personal qualities, but also to a large extent on external factors (Masten, 2013). In the business context, resilience theory gave rise to business continuity planning, which seeks to make companies more resistant to failure (Sharma, Bartunek et al., 2021). A business continuity plan fits well with resilience theory in that it anticipates emergencies and disruptions that might occur and sets out strategies to regain normalcy (Haidzir et al., 2018). Also referred to as a situational approach to leadership and management, it is a multi-faceted and situational-dependent approach with many implications for organisation and leadership, especially in times of adversity. The theory states that situational factors can affect the relationship between dependent and independent variables in the work environment, which in turn will affect employee behaviour, motivation, and effectiveness (Lartey, 2020). It posits that good management or leadership will take different forms depending on the situational variables at the time of adversity.

Instilling hope is critical to Christian crisis leadership. According to Firestone (2020), the Bible, which is the basic guide for the Christian faith, is vested in providing hope and forward-thinking, with God in control during crises. It reduces the panic, fear, and confusion related to crisis or adversity and instils calmness in the face of turbulence (Firestone, 2020), thus promoting the positive psychology that underlies the resilience theory. The novelty of the COVID-19 pandemic rendered universally accepted solutions to crisis leadership and management unfit. According to Dirani et al. (2020), it marked a turning point in modern times that compelled a shift in political, social, and economic norms. Informed by the prescripts of contingency theory, business organisations were forced to unlearn old approaches and philosophies and relearn skills and attitudes to address the adversity at hand (Lawton-Misra & Pretorius, 2021). To survive the COVID-19 pandemic Christian business leaders had to demonstrate courage, adaptiveness, and resilience. The way they responded espouses the core principles of the resilience and contingency theories.

2.6.2. The influence of the resilience and contingency theories on crisis management and business leadership

During the COVID-19 pandemic, emotional empathy emerged as an important leadership quality to ease suffering and losses (Nielsen et al., 2020; Lawton-Misra & Pretorius, 2021; Megheirkouni & Mejheirkouni, 2020). To navigate the COVID-19 pandemic, leaders had to possess interpersonal skills to address their followers' emotional trauma while simultaneously dealing with their personal grief and emotions. As Jones (2021) notes, such leadership traits embody the Christian values and standards of loving one's neighbour, putting others' interests first, empathy, living for one another, and demonstrating the gifts of the Spirit. The resilience theory has contributed to the concept of business continuity.

According to Sharma, Thomas et al. (2021), business continuity planning seeks to make companies more resistant to failure. Haidzir et al. (2018) note that a business continuity plan resembles a crisis management plan in that it anticipates emergencies and disruptions that could occur and defines strategies to bounce back and regain normal operations. Business continuity planning has significantly altered how organizations prepare for and tackle adversity by projecting different crisis scenarios and testing alternative solutions to identify critical factors that can assist businesses to alleviate the crisis and its effects.

While all businesses can and will face adversity, the COVID-19 pandemic can be regarded as a game changer in rethinking crisis leadership and management. Its unprecedented and disruptive nature, with high morbidity rates and restrictive regulations to control the spread of the virus, resulted in a paradigm shift, forcing Christian businesses to review some of their core practices and operations. Christian leaders that exhibited high levels of resilience were able to survive and, in some cases, thrive amidst the COVID-19 crisis. As Eliot (2020) notes, leaders that exhibit resilience and adopt a positive outlook are able to increase the level of resilience among their followers, thereby enabling them to survive the crisis.

All Christian business leaders are called on to be servant leaders who inspire a positive outlook among their followers. Christian businesses are therefore urged to invest resources in developing both resilient and servant leadership styles among their leaders. Resilient servant leadership can ultimately become a strategic advantage for Christian business organisations and enable them to respond to challenges (Boiral et al., 2021; Eliot, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has also highlighted the need for situational analysis to address and overcome a crisis. Informed by the contingency theory, Christian business leadership had to take cognisance of the COVID-19 situation, unlearn old practices, and adapt to new ways of doing things (Lartey, 2020).

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study used the qualitative research approach to answer the research questions. Qualitative research, according to Daniel (2016),

is a technique that seeks to understand human behaviours and viewpoints. It is utilised to look at people's attitudes, beliefs, and activism in a real-world setting. It allows the researcher and the participants to interact. According to Rahman (2017), qualitative research focuses on how people make meaning of their natural life experiences in their heads. Qualitative research yields result that are not statistical and hence cannot be analysed with statistical approaches.

Christian business owners and senior managers in Central Durban in KwaZulu-Natal made up the study's population. These firms were chosen because they are Christian-based companies with participants who are qualified to be part of the research project. Before choosing these organisations, the eligibility criteria were created. This entailed obtaining authorisation to conduct the study on-site and obtaining general replies to the research topic to determine the study's relevance to the chosen firms. This was done before gaining ethical approval and collecting data. The inclusion criteria, which look at the common elements of the population, are part of the participation criteria. To participate, the participants had to meet the conditions. Participants were also subjected to exclusion criteria to eliminate those who would have hampered data gathering (Sa'id & Madugu, 2015).

The sample approaches chosen for this study are convenience and purposive sampling. Convenience sampling is when participants are chosen based on their availability (Taherdoost, 2016). The sample for this study was chosen using a non-probability sampling technique. Christian business leaders were chosen as participants using a purposive sampling technique. The researcher selected people for a specific goal using a purposeful sampling approach. Participants who were available and simple to reach were chosen using the convenience sampling approach. The sample was chosen based on their availability due to a large number of Christian businesses (Moser & Korstjens, 2018).

A hundred leaders of the selected Christian businesses firm were interviewed using a semi-structured interview style to get data regarding their thoughts and views on the subject. The nature of a semi-structured interview is qualitative. It ensures that critical data is obtained while also affording the interviewer and participant flexibility in terms of clarification and question addition (Barrett & Twycross, 2018). The test-retest reliability instrument was utilised in this study to assess internal consistency. This was accomplished by conducting a pilot study on five selected Christian business leaders. According to Gani et al. (2020), after the interview frame has been pilot tested, adjusted, and the sample has been chosen, the next step is to gain access to the sample. The researcher was permitted by management to plan an online meeting with potential participants. The study's entire sample agreed to engage in interviews.

4. FINDINGS

This section presents the study's findings on the experiences of Christian business leaders in the KwaZulu-Natal province of South Africa.

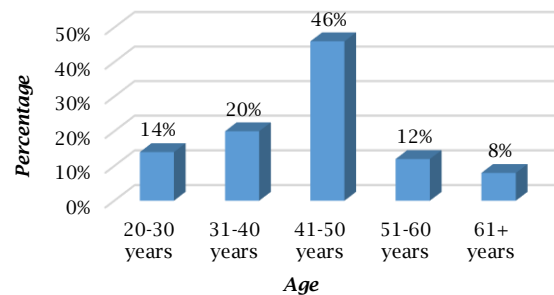
The sample comprised 100 Christian business leaders from various parts of the province. The section begins by presenting the demographic characteristics of the respondents, followed by the experiences of Christian business leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic.

4.1. Demographic characteristics of the respondents

4.1.1. Age

Figure 1 below shows that most of the respondents in the sample were between the ages of 41 and 50 years old (46%), followed by those aged 31 to 40 years old and 20 to 30 years old, representing 20% and 14% of the sample, respectively. Twelve percent (12%) were between 51 and 60 years of age, while 8% were 61 years old and older (N = 100).

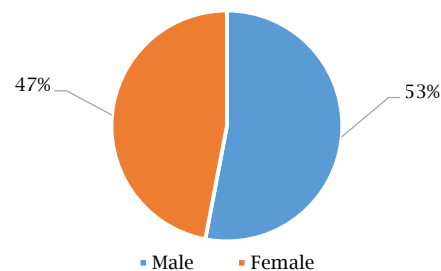
Figure 1. Age of respondents



4.1.2. Gender

Figure 2 below illustrates that 47% of the sample was male and 53% female. The higher number of female business leaders is encouraging as it suggests that Christian women are gaining confidence in pursuing entrepreneurship.

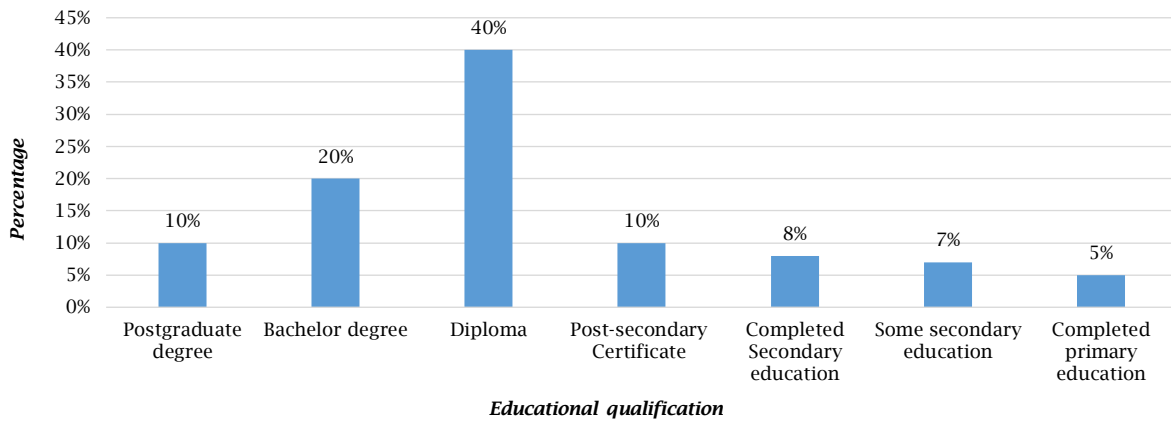
Figure 2. Gender of respondents



4.1.3. Highest level of education

As shown in Figure 3 below, most of the respondents had a diploma (40%) followed by a bachelor's degree (20%) and a post-secondary certificate (10%). This suggests that the level of education has an impact on the success of a business.

Figure 3. Educational qualifications

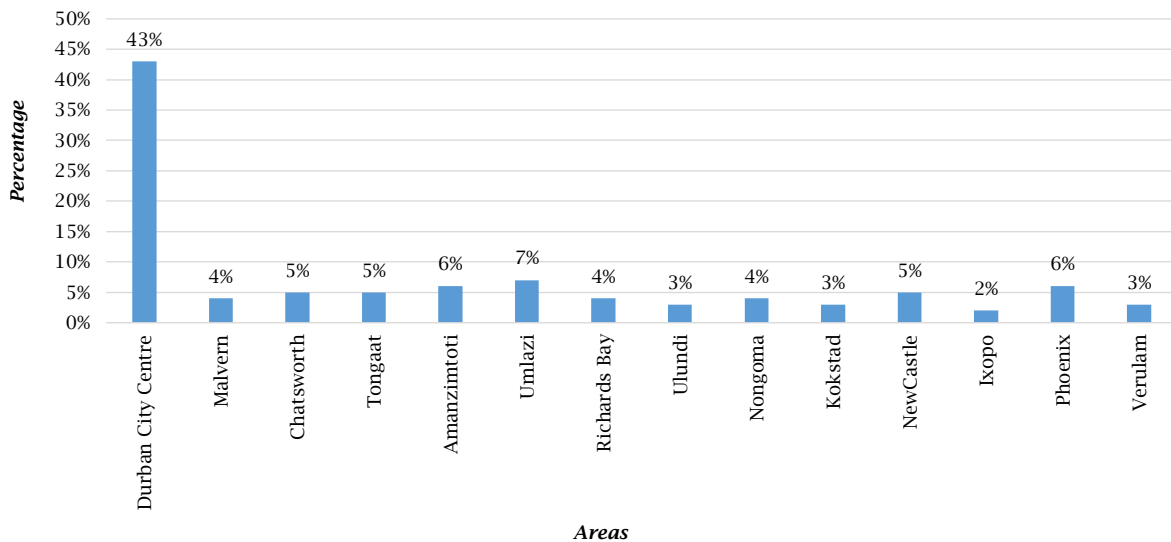


4.1.4. Location of the business

Figure 4 below reveals that 43% of the respondents' businesses were located in the Durban City Centre,

followed by 7% in Umlazi, and 6% in Phoenix, and Amanzimtoti, respectively. The other geographical locations represented less than 6% of the sample.

Figure 4. Location of the business

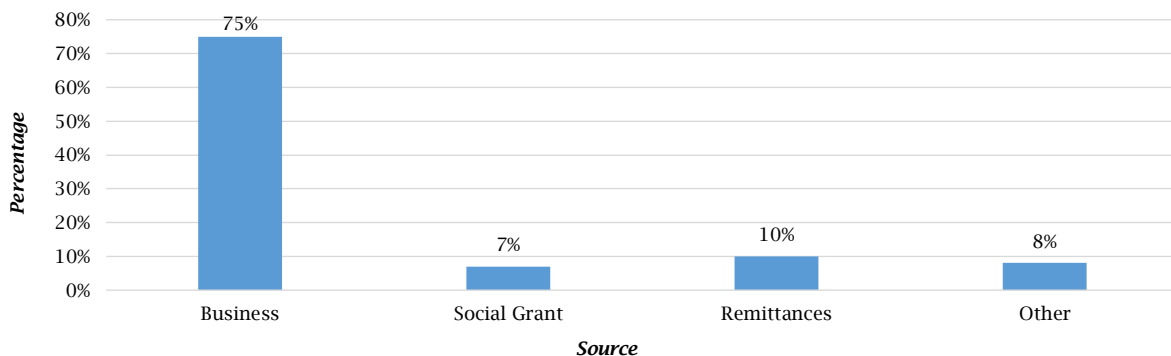


4.1.5. Main source of income

Most of the respondents (75%) reported that their businesses were their main source of income

followed by remittances (10%) and social grants (7%) (Figure 5 below).

Figure 5. The main source of income

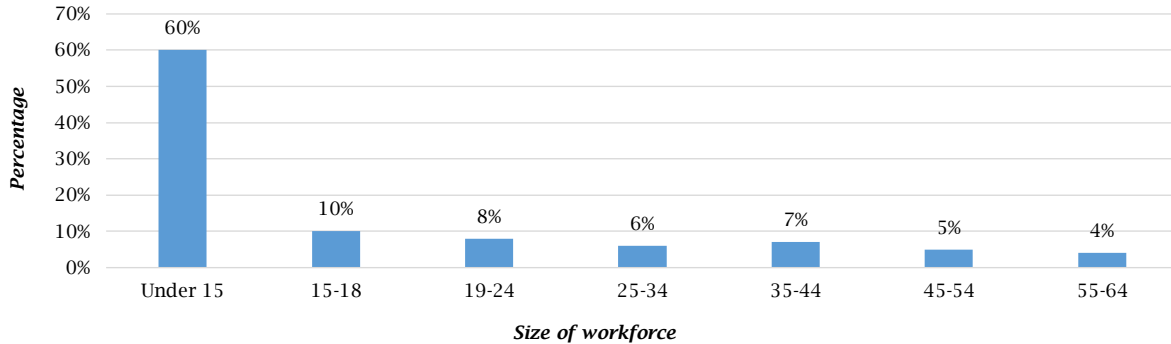


4.1.6. Number of employees in the business

Figure 6 shows that 60% of the businesses in the sample employed less than 15 employees,

followed by those with 15-18 employees (10%) and 19-24 employees (8%). Businesses with more employees had lower representation.

Figure 6. Number of employees

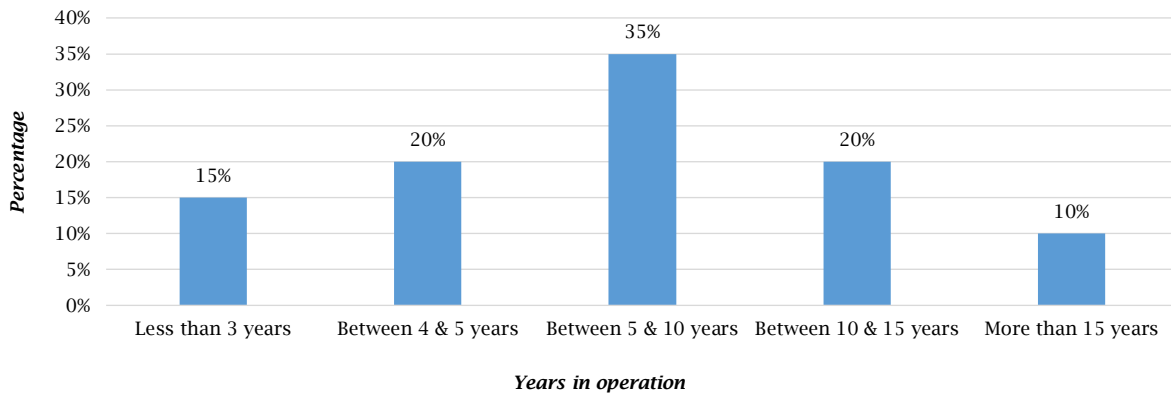


4.1.7. Period since inception

Most of the businesses (35%) in the sample had been operating for 5-10 years followed by those that had

been in operation for 4-5 years and 10-15 years, representing 20% of the sample (Figure 7). Fifteen percent (15%) had been operating for less than 3 years and 10% for more than 15 years.

Figure 7. Period of time in operation



4.2. Experiences of Christian business leaders during COVID-19

The semi-structured interview results are presented in this subsection, which is based on the research questions that were investigated. The end outcome is seen in the data presented below.

4.2.1. The challenges that Christian business leaders experienced whilst navigating through the unsettling period caused by the COVID-19 pandemic

All the businesses in the sample were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic in one way or another. When probed further, they reported as follows:

“My business was affected severely by COVID-19; I lost revenue and business opportunities...” (Respondent 10).

“My business lost clientele and suffered from loss of revenue...” (Respondent 15).

“My business collapsed; my clientele couldn’t trust me to deliver on their orders... because I didn’t have money to buy stock....” (Respondent 24).

4.2.2. Leadership insights gained during the pandemic

This subsection captures the Christian business leaders’ views on the insights that they gained during the pandemic. It also presents the necessary shifts that their organizations underwent in order to be resilient in the face of future public health emergencies.

4.2.3. Business lessons learnt during COVID-19

The respondents reported that they learnt the following lessons during COVID-19:

- Importance of being creative and innovative: “Be creative and innovative always to survive” (Participant 45).

- Build, nurture, and service your clientele: “Mind about your clientele; build, nurture and service them regularly even in tough times” (Participant 50).

- Trust in God: “My faith in God kept me strong all through this dark period - meaning during the pandemic” (Participant 56).

- Keep working hard by improving your services and products: “Clients are constantly seeking... innovation and products that meet their expectations and needs... so it is my responsibility as [a] business leader to ensure that our company is constantly innovating” (Participant 46).

- Communicate regularly with your clientele and update them on the company’s progress, products, and services: “Clients need to be appraised about the company and its services regularly, so they remain connected with the organization, otherwise you risk losing them to your competitors” (Participant 70).

- Have a sound financial management system: “Always ensure your financial management is functional to the extent that it provides relevant reports for decision making and is not vulnerable to any manipulation and fraud” (Participant 72).

- Resist the temptation to get into debt: “Be careful about taking debt that you and your business do not need... the levels of liability must be kept in check otherwise debt increases risks to any business entity especially in times of economic sluggishness like the one our country (meaning South Africa) is experiencing” (Participant 80).

- Remain connected in a business network or association: “A wise business leader must remain with the ‘herd’, meaning be with like-minded people... belonging to a business network is essential for one to remain at the cutting edge in terms of industry trends” (Participant 85).

- Invest wisely: “A wise business leader must invest wisely... one must do their homework carefully before putting money into an investment... seek credible investment information and advice from certified investment professionals to make better informed decisions” (Participant 35).

- Maintain high levels of professionalism: “Professionalism is a must for any thriving business entity. Therefore, ensure your staff always maintain the highest levels of professionalism in their dealings with the clients and service providers” (Participant 35).

- Invest in your human resources: “Invest in your human resources, they are the pillar for your business” (Participant 45).

4.2.4. Shifts required in the organization to develop resilience

The respondents reported that they had to make shifts in their business entities to cope with the pandemic and its effects.

- Exploring e-commerce: “Invest in online business and extend trading to other markets beyond our province (meaning KwaZulu-Natal), and explore national, continental and global markets” (Participant 98).

“Invest in online marketing and sell products and services online beyond local markets... tap into new clientele that is online” (Participant 100).

- Active and targeted networking with other businesses across sectors to enhance diversification of products and services: “Networking with other businesses across sectors provides an opportunity to learn something new that can be applied elsewhere to improve products for the business” (Participant 98).

- Explore business support from the government, especially for small businesses: “Lobby government

to establish a fund to support small businesses in times of public health emergencies” (Participant 90).

“The fund should cater for all people irrespective of their religion” (Participant 82).

- Establish an emergency fund: “Every business entity must have an emergency fund to cushion itself from economic shocks in future” (Participant 96).

- Ensure your business is adequately covered by insurance: “Given the unpredictable nature of pandemics and economic changes, businesses need to be adequately covered by insurance... so they can recover quicker in case they suffer income and equipment losses” (Participant 99).

- Share information internally with staff and externally with service providers and clients: “Share information freely and regularly with both your staff and clientele” (Participant 93).

- Maintain a high level of emotional intelligence: “As a business leader, you must be able to withstand pressure and provide leadership... even emotional leadership to your team all the time” (Participant 96).

“You must have [a] strong spirit to provide leadership to your team... even if you feel discouraged... as a leader, you must be able to provide emotional shelter to your staff... tough times require a tough mindset” (Participant 95).

- Invest in research and development: “Every business that intends to thrive and survive tough times... must be ahead of its competitors... invest in research to know the next levels of growth that your business should explore... it is important in the times businesses are operating in at the moment...” (Participant 25).

- Review your business strategy regularly: “Due to the changing times, review your business strategy regularly so that your business stays relevant and current...” (Participant 30).

- Invest in your faith in God: “Build your faith in God as a business leader; your faith is key to thriving in difficult times...” (Participant 39).

“Remain actively involved in your local church to build your faith in God” (Participant 42).

“Biblical faith grows in challenging times, so as a business leader your faith must also grow in these times for you to triumph” (Participant 62).

4.3. Factors that influence successful business leadership in a crisis such as COVID-19

This subsection presents the Christian business leaders’ views on the factors that influence successful business leadership in a public health emergency such as COVID-19. It also examines their perspectives on how business leaders can support one another during such times and how they can cushion their human resources in future crises as well as mitigate any risks to their businesses.

4.3.1. Factors that influence successful business leadership in a crisis

The business leaders identified the following factors that influence successful business leadership in a crisis:

- Business diversification: “Due to the changing times, every business leader should innovate to remain in business and [be] relevant...” (Participant 34).

- Saving and investing in an emergency fund: *“Every business entity must have an emergency fund... and this is the responsibility of the business leaders... this fund ensures that there are financial resources to support business operations during tough times”* (Participant 10).

- Securing comprehensive insurance to ensure the business is protected from any liabilities: *“Every business entity must have... insurance cover so that it is protected from liabilities that can expose it to risks...”* (Participant 17).

- Invest in relationships and join business networks: *“Relationships are vital for survival in tough times... Businesses that thrive are those that are linked to other business connections... there is exchange of information and ideas that boost confidence to hang on till [the] calamity [has] passed”* (Participant 65).

- Teamwork among colleagues: *“Teamwork reduces exposure to risks associated with solo performance... strong teams collaborate and work together to achieve great results...”* (Participant 27).

- Skills development for the team: *“Business leaders [should] invest in the development of their teams... a workforce that is enlightened is resilient... and an informed workforce is dependable in times of crisis... a significant booster of confidence to thrive”* (Participant 37).

- Ongoing organizational learning: *“Business leaders invest in ongoing learning and reflection... constantly harnessing insights and lessons learnt from their work to improve operational efficiency and effectiveness”* (Participant 42).

- Positive mindset: *“Business leaders must have positive mindset to thrive in times of crisis... the teams that they lead depend on them and therefore their mental tenacity is critical [and] is an important support mechanism to their employees”* (Participant 48).

4.3.2. Ways in which business leaders support one another in times of public health emergencies

The following factors identified by business leaders as critical to business success are related to the relationship between business leaders.

- Financial support: *“Business leaders must support each other financially so that they uplift one another, especially now in times of difficulties and economic strain...”* (Participant 49).

- Peer-learning: *“Business leaders must learn from each other and boost their knowledge about business survival strategies in difficult economic times...”* (Participant 39).

- Spiritual support for one another: *“Business leaders must belong to a church network where they can nurture their faith and build themselves up so that they can withstand the vicissitudes of life...”* (Participant 75).

- Information sharing: *“Business leaders must share useful business information with each other and boost their confidence and business knowledge in times such as COVID-19 for their own resilience...”* (Participant 52).

- Business and leadership mentorship and business coaching: *“Business leaders must have a coach and mentor to guide them through challenging business times...”* (Participant 50).

- Strengthen institutional systems: *“Systems make organizations functional and operationally relevant; it is critical that businesses strengthen their systems to survive economic shocks from the pandemic...”* (Participant 79).

- Business support: *“Business needs all forms of support to thrive in difficult economic times... financial, operational, and systemic support is crucial for business success”* (Participant 20).

4.3.3. Ways in which business leaders can develop systems to cushion their employees in a future crisis

This subsection captures the respondents' views on how business leaders can develop systems to cushion their employees in future crises.

- Collaborative partnerships with other business leaders: *“Business leaders should form partnerships with each other so that as a network of business leaders... there is a support system to help each other in times of difficulty”* (Participant 8).

- Employee skills development: *“Smart business entities invest in their human resource... they [employees] are the key drivers of business... so investing in them is important for business sustainability and future growth”* (Participant 14).

- Promote emotional and mental health: *“Business entities must be conscious of the mental wellness of their employees... and therefore need to pay attention to the emotional well-being of their teams”* (Participant 29).

- Social protection: *“Business leaders need to provide insurance for their employees to ensure that they have something to fall back on in times of difficulties”* (Participant 24).

- Strategic business collaboration: *“Business leaders should forge strategic collaborations where they can exchange information and ideas to collaborate on and strengthen their business offering...”* (Participant 20).

- Diligence as a virtue: *“Embracing diligence as a virtue is a necessary discipline in any business entity that is committed to thriving and becoming a market leader in their area of expertise against all odds”* (Participant 25).

- Explore modes of working that will enhance performance and productivity: *“COVID-19 has provided alternative modes of working and business entities need to adapt to technological changes to remain relevant and actively engaged in the marketplace... at the same time, they must be creative in providing opportunities for flexible working to spark creativity”* (Participant 41).

4.3.4. Ways in which business leaders can mitigate against risks

The following factors identified as critical to business success by business leaders are related to leaders' ability to deal with risks.

- Investing in spiritual wellness: *“Christian business leaders thrive on their faith to survive challenging times... so building one's spiritual tenacity is important in mitigating against risks associated with economic tough times”* (Participant 28).

- Invest in technology: *“Investing in... business technology provides the impetus for a business entity to thrive in these times... it is necessary business spending”* (Participant 71).

- Manage your finances: *“Successful business entities have sound financial management practices... they do not waste a dime... this discipline is a cushion for any progressive business with a future”* (Participant 40).

- Financial planning and investing in high-return investment portfolios: *“Financial planning for businesses is necessary for better financial protection against unforeseen times of economic distress such as COVID-19”* (Participant 11).

- Invest in personal development: *“Business leaders must invest in their own personal development to provide the necessary leadership for their teams... without such personal development, business growth is not guaranteed”* (Participant 65).

5. DISCUSSION

COVID-19 had a tremendous effect on all aspects of human existence including national economies and businesses (Bai et al., 2021). The degree of survival is solely dependent on human resilience. The pandemic has tested nation-states and humanity’s limits and ability to withstand adverse situations, cope with their effects, and recover (Ajili & Slimene, 2021). However, the road to recovery has not been easy (Gorjian Khanzad & Gooyabadi, 2021). The study’s findings show that the capabilities of Christian business leaders depended on the range of factors set out in subsections 4.3 and 4.4. Business leaders had to act decisively while exploring opportunities to recoup and recover (Bonilla-Enriquez & Caballero-Morales, 2020).

The insights gained during the pandemic discussed in subsection 4.2.2 suggest that Christian business leaders need to boost their leadership and organizational capabilities to continue thriving in uncertain times in the aftermath of the pandemic. In order to be resilient, they should (Amadi-Echendu & Thopil, 2020, p. 120):

- Plan and prepare for the next inevitable disruption by designating a crisis response team, designing a crisis response plan aligned to their strategy, goals, and purpose, and building an integrated resilience program.

- Break down silos between resilience competencies and teams, and integrate them to coordinate the tactics, tools, and technologies required for effective crisis response.

- Build organizational resilience by establishing high-level resilience governance, revisiting, and rethinking the crisis management structure and response strategy, and fostering a culture of resilience.

The findings also point to the need for Christian business leaders to re-evaluate their business models to strengthen their resilience (Hadjielias et al., 2022). They should focus on (Anderson et al., 2021, p. 49):

- Investing in new digital experiences, products, and services in response to changes in customer behaviors and needs.

- Developing new partnerships, both within and outside of their industries. As per the findings discussed in Section 4, partnerships are critical support mechanisms for Christian business leaders and their enterprises.

- Adjusting operational and supply chain systems to manage risk. Business entities are seeking to balance the need for just-in-time delivery with protection against delays or shutdowns by securing alternative sources of supply and ensuring that the labor force can continue to operate.

- Improving the sales model. Most businesses have revised their sales model to adapt the way they market and sell their products. They are shifting to contactless delivery, home delivery, and pick-up orders. Moreover, business-to-business models are shifting to remote and digital models.

- Faster product development through rapid iteration. Client preferences have changed significantly during the pandemic, forcing businesses to create innovative products and services that match clients’ expectations and preferences.

In summary, in times of uncertainty, Christian business leadership requires resilient faith in God and His abundant grace, complemented by the practical application of the insights set out in this paper. Overcoming the complexities and uncertainties of the post-pandemic era calls for a redesign of the “next normal” which requires openness to deal with ongoing uncertainty and change (Portuguez Castro & Gómez Zermeño, 2021, p. 50).

6. CONCLUSION

While all businesses can and will face adversity, the COVID-19 pandemic can be regarded as a game changer in rethinking crisis leadership and management. Its unprecedented and disruptive nature, with high morbidity rates and restrictive regulations to control the spread of the virus, resulted in a paradigm shift, forcing Christian businesses to review some of their core practices and operations. The study wants to know how Christian business leaders navigated the difficult and uncertain times of COVID-19, so that their companies thrived, retained their employees, and continued to operate successfully in the midst of a global economic crisis.

The study found that Christian leaders that exhibited high levels of resilience were able to survive and, in some cases, thrive amidst the COVID-19 crisis. Leaders that exhibited resilience and adopted a positive outlook are able to increase the level of resilience among their followers, thereby enabling them to survive the crisis. The results of the study demonstrate that a variety of variables listed in this paper affected the abilities of Christian business leaders. Business leaders needed to take decisive action while looking for ways to recover.

It is therefore recommended that Christian business leaders are called on to be servant leaders who inspire a positive outlook among their followers. Christian businesses are therefore urged to invest resources in developing both resilient and servant leadership styles among their leaders. Resilient servant leadership can ultimately become a strategic advantage for Christian business organisations and enable them to respond to challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic has also highlighted the need for situational analysis to address and overcome a crisis. Informed by the contingency theory, Christian business leaders had to take cognisance of the COVID-19 situation,

unlearn old practices, and adapt to new ways of doing things. An organisation's success during a crisis depends on the application of contingent factors to the situation. The situational variables of the COVID-19 pandemic such as high morbidity rates, a highly contagious virus, and restrictive measures to control its spread highlighted

the contingent factors required to survive the crisis. These included the environment, goals or tasks, technology, the composition of the group being led, and the leader's personality. Empathy, caring, compassion, trust, and moral ethics are associated with the leadership required to manage pandemic and post-pandemic.

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