

THESIS

LEADERSHIP IN UNCERTAIN TIMES: EXPLORING LEADER-MEMBER EXCHANGE  
AND LEADERSHIP ADAPTATIONS DURING THE COVID-19 TRANSITION

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## ABSTRACT

### LEADERSHIP IN UNCERTAIN TIMES: EXPLORING LEADER-MEMBER EXCHANGE AND LEADERSHIP ADAPTATIONS DURING THE COVID-19 TRANSITION

This thesis explores leadership dynamics during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on how leader-member relationships (LMX) influenced leadership strategies. Using qualitative methods, the study examines the experiences of 12 leaders who managed teams across various industries through the sudden transition to remote or hybrid work. The research highlights how intentional communication, support, safety, and relationship-building shaped leadership practices during this crisis. Leaders employed tailored communication strategies to maintain engagement, reduce uncertainty, and ensure that their team members felt valued as individuals. Findings demonstrate that virtual leadership required heightened intentionality, emphasizing person-first approaches and the importance of consistent support. Leaders had to adapt their communication styles, increase transparency, and show empathy to maintain trust and team cohesion. The study also discusses the theoretical implications of LMX during times of crisis, showing how strong leader-member exchanges positively impacted motivation, retention, and well-being. Practical recommendations highlight the need for clear communication, flexibility, and emotional support in remote leadership settings.

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## Introduction

*The pandemic time was soupy, as if you're just swirling around in this messy time where it feels never-ending.*

*—Liz, Managing Director*

The pandemic was a strange and challenging time. The metaphor Liz used captures the chaotic and disorienting nature of the COVID-19 crisis when the world faced challenges that touched every corner of society. The virus disrupted the usual way of life, pushing organizations, their members, and leaders to their limits worldwide. As people tried to grapple with the extensive aftermath, it became clear that this crisis went beyond immediate challenges, fundamentally changing how we go about our daily lives and reshaping the definition of “normal.” The COVID-19 pandemic was one of the most severe crises, unsettling many organizations, their members, and leaders and affecting billions of people’s lives and livelihoods (van Stralen et al., 2020).

Organizational crises are adverse events that happen quickly and unexpectedly in an organization (Coombs, 2019). The COVID-19 outbreak placed a substantial strain on organizations and its employees. Governments implemented a wide range of limitations on companies to keep people safe and healthy, including social distancing to decrease the chances of exposure to the virus (Anderson & Kelliher, 2020). As a result of social distancing measures, remote and hybrid ways of work emerged as an adaptable working arrangement across industrial sectors and organizations (Chang et al., 2022). Transitioning to remote work can create dramatic shifts in attitudes, values, and beliefs for specific stakeholders (Heifetz & Laurie, 2001), as well as process improvements, new strategies, and even new business models for many organizations (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020). Organizational crises can jeopardize an organization’s goals, inflict physical, emotional, and financial hardship on its stakeholders, and have significant

repercussions for the organization's reputation and relationships with those it serves (Coombs, 2019). In such uncertain and critical situations, leadership may significantly impact the efficacy of a crisis management.

While conceptualizations of leadership vary, the definition adopted for this study underscores leadership as an interactive and dynamic process that involves adaptability. Specifically, this study adopts the definition provided by Northouse (2021): Leadership is a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal (p.6). This definition of leadership calls us to focus on leadership as a process. Leadership is defined as a process since it is not a characteristic or attribute of the leader alone but rather an interaction between the leader and those who follow (Northouse, 2021). The word process means that although a leader influences others, they are also influenced by their followers. It highlights that leadership is interactive rather than one-directional, making it accessible to everybody and not only to a team's formally recognized leader (Northouse, 2021). In the uncertain context of a pandemic, influential leaders apply combinations of fundamental leadership principles that adapt and evolve with the needs and responses of their followers (Leithwood et al., 2008). Good leaders are frequently called upon to solve issues, carry out plans, and create visions. During a crisis, all these actions are useful (Coombs, 2019). This conceptualization of leadership as a dynamic and interactive process, emphasizing adaptability, is particularly needed in times of crisis. As this research focuses on leadership in the context of crisis, this framework serves as a foundational pillar, highlighting leaders' need to navigate and adapt to challenges effectively.

Individuals typically look to the leader during organizational crises for guidance and effective solutions. When organizations experience a crisis, all eyes are on leaders (Uhr, 2017). This spotlight can burden leadership substantially, as it necessitates significant mental focus.

Their responsibility is to navigate the crisis and instill confidence and resilience in employees (AlKnawy, 2018). Their role is especially important during crises, because in times of extended exposure to stressors, employees' motivation and dedication are significantly reduced (Gifford et al., 2022). Leaders are left to lead and manage many people who are demotivated and disoriented by the chaos and disturbance caused by the crisis. Moreover, during the pandemic, managers found themselves in the role of remote leaders who had to overcome challenges regarding how they communicate with and influence their teams (Dansereau et al., 2013). Therefore, team leaders' role becomes even more critical since they can improve employee satisfaction (Mufti et al., 2020). Additionally, support from leaders plays an important role in how employees feel during a crisis. It has been shown that the absence of support and appreciation can be linked to a perceived lack of support and acknowledgment (Amabile et al., 2004). Therefore, employees are more likely to be committed to the company when they believe their leader is supporting them (Gifford et al., 2022). It is in times of crisis that, more than ever, "leadership remains essential to organizational survival and success" (Vaughn et al., 2020).

Establishing strong relationships between members and leaders holds considerable significance, yielding valuable benefits throughout various stages of their organizational journey, especially in times of crisis. Among leadership theories, the Leader-Member-Exchange (LMX) theory emphasizes the quality of the dyadic exchange that emerges between leaders and followers. Positive work-related outcomes including increased follower satisfaction, and enhanced performance have been linked to strong leader-member relationships (Gerstner & Day, 1997). This does not mean leaders always successfully create positive relationships with all their followers. The failure to connect positively with everyone can result from a lack of interest on the side of the follower (Schyns & Day, 2010) or a lack of resources on the leader's side to

develop positive relationships with all followers (Schyns et al., 2005). These disparate relationships may cause jealousy among individuals who work in the same groups (Kim et al., 2013). They can also create perceptual obstacles for workers that might have a detrimental effect on their performance (Tse & Troth, 2013). LMX is a useful theory because it highlights the importance of leaders' role and influence on employee perceptions, and the decisions they make in an organization. A leader's impact can result in an employee's commitment to stay with their organization during challenging times (Raghuram et al., 2017).

Over the first few months of the pandemic significant disruptions affected many companies due to an increasing number of workers leaving their positions. (Rosenberg, 2021; Bartik et al., 2020); this phenomenon has been termed "The Great Resignation" (Linzer et al., 2022). Klotz (2020), who has studied the exits of hundreds of workers, said in an interview that the numbers of resignations were multiplied by several pandemic-related epiphanies such as family time, passion projects, life and death. Many individuals were no longer inclined to accept a nine-to-five job with expensive commutes, rigid schedules, and inflexible leaders (Hopkins & Figaro, 2021). Research has shown that when leaders and followers build stronger connections and create emotional bonds, there is a decrease in the likelihood of employees intending to leave their positions (Agarwal et al., 2012). Although data shows a rise in employee turnover during the pandemic, there are several reasons that have kept individuals within their organizations, such as stability of the organization, being offered flexibility, and support (Williams et al., 2024).

Now, almost five years after the outbreak of COVID-19, we might consider ourselves in a post-COVID era. However, COVID-19's lasting effects on organizations might not be realized for some time. Leaders play a pivotal role in guiding their organizations through crises (Soeardi et al., 2023), ensuring survival and the potential for growth and resilience. As we reflect on the

events of the past five years, the enduring impact of this crisis on organizations is evident. This impact lingered, leading to potential business restructurings, layoffs, and diverse economic, social, and psychological impacts on workers (Kniffin et al., 2021). By delving into the dynamic world of leadership in the context of the pandemic, I aimed to explore both leaders' and their team members' experiences with leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic, the effects of their interpersonal relationships within the organization on the crisis communication in this period, and their transition to hybrid or remote work.

The research aims to dive into the nuanced dynamics of leadership during crises in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath. This study will explore how leaders and their team members experienced and navigated the challenges posed by the COVID-19 crisis, with a specific emphasis on the role of existing leader-member relationships in influencing leadership approaches. This thesis is divided into five chapters. In the introduction, I have provided the context in which the study will be set and briefly discussed the role of leadership in crisis. Then, in the literature review, I review the concepts and theories that helped shape the foundation of this study. Next, the methods chapter outlines the approach I took and the procedure of data collection and includes participants' data. That is followed by the analysis chapter, where I introduce the themes that emerged from the study, explore participants' responses, and provide analysis. Finally, the discussion chapter offers theoretical and practical implications of the study, along with suggestions for future research and limitations of the current study.

## **Literature Review**

This literature review explores leadership through the lens of communication, in the context of the challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. I begin by examining leadership from a communication perspective, where leaders use symbols, language, and stories to communicate with followers. I then transition to crisis leadership, emphasizing the critical role of leaders in navigating unexpected situations, such as those encountered during the pandemic, where the role of communication becomes even more vital. Next, the dynamics of remote work and its benefits and challenges will be addressed. The section highlights how remote work has reshaped traditional work environments and that it can introduce new complexities for leaders. In this context, virtual leadership emerges as a distinctive mode of leadership that required leaders to adapt their strategies to maintain effective communication and team cohesion in a physically separated setting. Finally, the review delves into Leader-Member Exchange theory, which focuses on the dyadic relationships between leaders and their followers. This section reinforces the idea that leadership is inherently relational, with the quality of communication between leaders and team members having an effect on shaping organizational outcomes.

### **Leadership From a Communication Perspective**

In their book *Leadership: A Communication Perspective*, Johnson and Hackman (2018) argue that leadership is fundamentally centered around communication. Leaders use symbols, through language, stories, and rituals, to construct and reinforce distinctive group cultures. They communicate not only about the present but also about the past and future, engaging in evaluation, analysis, and goal setting to create a desirable vision for the group. Leaders consciously employ these symbols to guide their followers toward shared goals. This symbolic communication is essential to leadership, as it modifies the behaviors, attitudes, and needs of

others to align with the group's objectives (Johnson & Hackman, 2018). This perspective emphasizes that leadership is not just about individual traits or actions but about the effective use of communication to influence and direct collective behavior.

Expanding on this communication-centered view, leadership is increasingly seen as a relational phenomenon that is co-constructed through interactions within specific social and organizational contexts. Fairhurst and Uhl-Bien (2012) also argue that leadership is not merely a function of an individual's traits or charisma but is shaped by the social interactions between individuals acting within these contexts. This shifts the focus from traditional views of leadership as an individual attribute to a more dynamic process that is embedded in the relationships and communications among people. Barge and Hirokawa (1989) reinforce this idea by stating that leadership occurs through interaction and communication, by contending that effective leadership is deeply relational. This relational perspective acknowledges that leadership is constructed in and influenced by the broader organizational and societal structures, cultures, and processes (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010; Barge & Fairhurst, 2008).

Moreover, the importance of communication in leadership is further underscored by the idea that leaders must be highly competent communicators to succeed. Johansson and colleagues (2014) describe a communicative leader as one who actively engages employees, making them feel involved and heard. Therefore, leadership requires not just the ability to lead but the ability to participate in meaningful dialogue, share and ask for feedback, and make decisions through involving the followers' opinions. That is to say, leadership is a discursive process and is constructed through ongoing communication within organizational, social contexts (Fairhurst, 2007). Communication is thus a key prerequisite for effective leadership, as it directly or indirectly influences the structures, cultures, power distribution, and overall communication

within an organization (Tench et al., 2017b). Leaders who possess strong communication skills are better equipped to navigate these complexities and drive their organizations toward success (Berger & Meng, 2014).

In this study too, I regard leadership as inherently tied to communication, and it aims to highlight the importance of communication and relational dynamic in analyzing leadership within organizations. This study argues that principles of leadership grounded in communication become even more critical when applied to crisis situations. Crisis leadership demands not only strong relational and cultural communication skills but also the ability to adapt in order to navigate complex, high-stakes situations. Understanding how leaders communicate during crises, and how they manage relationships under pressure, will further illuminate the role of communication in effective leadership.

### **Crisis Leadership**

Leading during a crisis requires leaders to employ unique skills, especially as they navigate through different stages brought about by the crisis. A crisis can be defined as an unanticipated event that puts stakeholders' expectations at risk and has the potential to negatively affect an organization's performance and other adverse outcomes (Coombs, 2019). Crises can disrupt stakeholders' expectations of organizational behavior and lead to negative consequences for both the organization and its stakeholders (Coombs, 2019). The basic crisis management process consists of three stages: 1) pre-crisis, 2) crisis response, and 3) post-crisis (Coombs, 2020). The measures that organizations take in the lead-up to a crisis are referred to as pre-crisis. The pre-crisis period consists of two stages: preparation and prevention; where preparation gets individuals ready for when a crisis arises, and prevention aims to avert the crisis in the first place (Coombs, 2020). An organization enters the crisis response stage when a crisis emerges and

organizations must act (Coombs, 2020). During this time, the leadership team's main priorities include managing the crisis and getting the organization back to operating as usual (Coombs, 2006). To better understand the crisis and address the needs of multiple stakeholders, leaders, in the early stages of a crisis engage in activities focused on sense-making and perspective-taking. (Wooten & James, 2008). However, knowing when you have transitioned from crisis response to the post-crisis stage is not always easily detectable (Coombs, 2020). While the organization is returning to normal operations in the post-crisis period, and the crisis is no longer a priority, there will be residual worries about crisis communication and a need to learn from the crisis. Actively learning from challenges and implementing constructive changes to foster continuous improvement is at the foundation of what is considered to be crisis leadership (Wooten & James, 2008).

Crisis leadership can be defined as the “process of leading group members through a sudden and largely unanticipated, intensely negative, and emotionally draining circumstance” (DuBrin, 2013, p. 3). It is also a process that largely depends on communication (Liu et al., 2020). When an organization is in crisis, both internal and external stakeholders tend to place their attention on the organization's leader (König et al., 2020). As a result, an organization's survival during a crisis is often dependent on leaders' adaptation to the organization's changing needs and making timely and creative decisions (Mutch, 2015).

Crises are sudden; therefore, a quick yet thoughtful reaction from the leaders can change the course of crisis management. Leadership during a crisis differs significantly from leadership in “normal” situations, as people are affected by inadequate or failing systems (Rego & Garau, 2007). There might be weaknesses in communication, technology, information, and infrastructure. While these processes are important in everyday operations, a crisis can intensify

existing weaknesses or expose new ones, making timely leadership actions even more essential. Whether these failures are short-lived or prolonged, when processes fail, organizations and people find themselves in unknown territories (Rego & Garau, 2007). Effective leaders use a variety of techniques during crises. It has been suggested that a transactional leadership style (where followers side with the leader in exchange for rewards, praise, resources, or to avoid negative outcomes), is effective during times of threat, especially when it comes to communication revolving around what needs to be accomplished (Brass, 2008). Another strategy, which happens to be a part of transformational leadership, is for the leader to make their vision act as a “unifying force” in a way that would create harmony in the values, beliefs, and thoughts of the leader and the followers (Zhang et al., 2021). Research indicates crisis leaders must be capable of team building, networking, and coordination since working within a team and having a unified mission and a vision to facilitate desired achievements is essential for their success in times of crisis (Patton, 2007; Lester & Krejci, 2007). Transparency is also an essential component of crisis leadership. Leaders must be clear about what they know and do not know and have regular, precise communication with their followers during a crisis to reduce the chances of anxiety and misinformation (Foster et al., 2020).

Crisis leadership is an ongoing process that includes cultivating a mentality for reflecting on, adjusting to, and learning from the crisis at the time it is happening as well as its aftermath (James & Wooten, 2010). Crisis leadership involves the leader's role in managing both the immediate demands of the crisis and the longer-term responsibilities of guiding the organization before, during, and after the crisis (Firestone & Firestone, 2020). During times of crisis, various aspects of organizational dynamics undergo changes, including the relationships between leaders and team members. Given the challenges at hand, it is essential to study how these dynamics

shift. Moving beyond the immediate crisis response, my focus widens to study the relationship between leaders and team members within the organizational crisis context. Understanding how leader-member interactions evolve during uncertain periods is crucial for managing challenging circumstances effectively. This dynamic between leaders and team members will be explored further at the end of the literature review.

### **Remote Work During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, remote work underwent a transformative shift, evolving from an optional practice to a vital strategy for business continuity. The global crisis prompted organizations to swiftly adapt their operational models, challenging traditional work structures and emphasizing the fundamental role of technology in sustaining productivity. In this section, I will start by examining the general aspects of remote work and enforced remote work. I will then transition to remote work in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### ***Remote and Enforced Remote Work***

Generally speaking, work performed in locations other than the corporation's facilities has been referred to as remote work. However, the pandemic lockdown created a situation called enforced remote work (Anderson & Kelliher, 2020). Enforced remote work means organizations need to quickly use new digital tools, change how they do business, and help employees with technology because of certain rules, including quarantine (Waizenegger et al., 2020). Research shows that enforced remote labor might be harmful (Palumbo, 2020). Enforced remote work, especially home-based telecommuting, may detrimentally affect work-life balance by increasing conflicts between professional and personal responsibilities, potentially leading to heightened work-related fatigue and subsequent physical and emotional exhaustion among remote workers (Palumbo, 2020). Because of the large-scale and unexpected nature of the COVID-19 pandemic,

investigating how individuals experienced changes in engagement, communication, and work-life boundaries is crucial to understanding the broader impacts on both work and life. Enforced remote work differs from typical remote work in two essential ways. First, the typical remote worker spends a few days working remotely and a few days working in the office (Global Workplace Analytics, 2020a). Second, the average remote worker decides to work remotely based on their particular position and preferences (Zhang et al., 2021). The enforced remote worker, on the other hand, faces challenges such as long teleconferencing hours, less-than-ideal home offices, poor internet, and juggling work with childcare, which may result in impacts on their well-being and productivity (Zhang et al., 2021). When the choice is accessible, individuals who choose to use it will probably benefit from it. The differences between being enforced to work remotely and choosing to do so set the ground for exploring individuals' experiences in the evolving work structures in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.

For a considerable time, information technology has facilitated alternative work-organizing methods that challenge traditional management norms (Popovici & Popovici, 2020). These modern structures offer various choices to address the increasing need for work flexibility (Boselie, 2010). Supported by appropriate tools for remote work, this approach to work has been swiftly gaining traction over recent decades. Remote work has broadened the range of opportunities available to employees, particularly those who operate in non-traditional office environments. Changes in workforce demographics and social structure, such as a high percentage of nuclear families, single parents, and working parents (Dunatchik et al., 2021), make remote employment appealing to employees today (Bellmann & Hübler, 2020), as it offers employees more flexibility in terms of time and space to complete their tasks (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007). In this context, the appeal of remote employment becomes apparent,

particularly for individuals navigating non-traditional office settings and seeking flexible solutions for their professional engagements.

Remote work gives employees more flexibility and autonomy and boosts job satisfaction. The flexibility to organize their work activities and decide when and where to complete their tasks allows employees to align their work with their personal preferences (Maruyama & Tietze, 2012; Hornung & Glaser, 2009; Pyöriä, 2011). Regardless of location or time, this flexibility enhances organizational agility by allowing workers to access work-related information (Overmyer, 2011). The resulting autonomy and flexibility contribute to higher job satisfaction and improved work morale and cultivate a corporate image of a caring and flexible workplace (Pyöriä, 2011). Notably, employees experience a significant reduction in general stress levels when working remotely, attributed to decreased daily stressors such as commuting time and interruptions from colleagues (Delanoeije & Verbruggen, 2020). This reduction in stressors further enhances the overall positive impact of remote work on employee well-being.

Remote work stands as a transformative force, benefiting not only individuals but also the organizations in which they work. Remote working is beneficial, especially for large organizations, because it allows for more flexible hours of productivity management (Flores, 2019). In the United States alone, several businesses have turned to remote employees as part of their workforce. On the plus side, remote work increases employee satisfaction and engagement while decreasing work-family friction (Giovanis, 2018), reduces relevant expenditures such as commuting expenses (Boselie, 2010), and encourages greater efficiency and production (Flores, 2019). Other research has found that remote work benefits employee productivity (Choudhury et al., 2021), as employees feel they can work more effectively when working remotely (Chang et al., 2022). Remote work has become an attractive option for contemporary employees seeking

flexibility and resonates with the adapting work practices to accommodate diverse individual needs.

On the other hand, working remotely is not free of challenges. Implementing remote work methods comes with potential risks and problems. For instance, organizations may struggle to establish a culture that embraces and supports remote work. This can negatively impact employee motivation and satisfaction, and as a result, can hinder the organization's ability to retain staff (Peters et al., 2016). Industries vary in their adaptability to remote work. The availability of devices that allow people to operate safely and securely from anywhere enhances the growing popularity of remote work. Because of the nature of the work, it appeared that educated workers were most inclined to work remotely prior to COVID-19 (Arunprasad et al., 2022). However, after COVID-19, even conventional occupations such as education, health, tourism, and even legal work are migrating to remote work (Dingel & Neiman, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic transformed work structures, compelling numerous organizations to abruptly adopt remote work as the new normal.

### ***Remote Work and the COVID-19 Pandemic***

COVID-19 necessitated a shift in work dynamics, compelling organizations worldwide to implement enforced remote work. It created a stressful time for many as remote work was only one problem on top of many others amid the chaos COVID-19 brought about. Zhang and colleagues (2021) conducted research on remote work to understand public attitudes by analyzing Twitter data from March 30 to July 5, 2020. Their analysis revealed diverse experiences, with some workers expressing the benefits of remote work while others encountered challenges. Notably, one tweet conveyed heightened stress associated with remote work, stating, "Remote work is more stressful than working from an office" (p. 807). Another tweet

emphasized the strain on individuals, expressing concern about stress levels due to various challenges, such as remote work, understaffed departments, and inadequate tools (p. 807). In the context of team management, the tweets highlighted the importance of socialization for remote workers, with one suggesting, “Don’t underestimate the socialization factor,” emphasizing its role in building social bonds and enhancing team collaboration (p. 808). Another tweet provided managerial advice for navigating the challenges of swift shifts to remote work, underscoring the manager’s role in removing barriers to forward momentum (p. 808). The diverse experiences of remote work during the pandemic make it evident that understanding the challenges and dynamics of managing employees in this context is crucial. This brings attention to the impact of remote work on leadership and individual outcomes, highlighting the need to explore how remote work influences leadership decision-making and inter-team relationships.

### **Virtual Leadership**

There is a need to understand the unique challenges leaders face in managing employees in a remote environment (Kelley & Kelloway, 2012). Leaders need to address issues related to lack of social interactions, and find ways to minimize distractions for remote workers (Kowalski & Ślebarska, 2022). Additionally, leaders must consider the potential impact of remote work on social relationships and team cohesion (Kowalski & Ślebarska, 2022). Managing people remotely differs from managing people who are co-located. Remote management requires deliberate efforts to support communication and connect team members through various channels, such as chat, phone, or video, contrasting with the tactically reactive nature of in-person management (Coffey & Wolf, 2018). Managing in-person employees and remote employees who have the same responsibilities can lead to equity concerns, as differences in work types may create perceptions of unfairness (Coffey & Wolf, 2018). That is to say, there might be

issues of inequity if, in an organization, “managers have onsite staff that do more ad-hoc work than remote members (who do more real work)” (Coffey & Wolf, 2018, p.9).

Miscommunications and interpersonal challenges are heightened in remote work environments, emphasizing the importance of building trust, establishing norms for asynchronous communication, and providing timely feedback (Coffey & Wolf, 2018). That being said, managers also play a crucial role in guiding technological changes and emphasizing the advantages that emerged from the mandatory use of technology during the pandemic (Spagnoli et al., 2021). Effective virtual leadership has been associated with various benefits for organizations embracing remote work, including heightened productivity, environmental sustainability, and improved work-life balance for remote employees (Contreras et al., 2020).

Achieving optimal performance in virtual teams hinges on the dynamic interplay between leadership strategies, effective communication facilitated by technology, and the ability to transcend physical distance. Communication and coordination among remote team members are made possible through the facilitation of technology (Huang et al., 2010). Communication effectiveness emerges as a pivotal factor mediating the relationship between leadership style and team performance (Neufeld et al., 2010). Despite physical distance, virtual leadership demonstrates that proximity is not necessarily a defining factor in determining leader performance (Neufeld et al., 2010). This highlights the interplay between leadership, communication, and performance in the context of remote work.

In virtual environments, the smooth functioning of all aspects of a team relies crucially on clear communication, which enhances direction and encourages transparency. Ensuring communication systems are developed and adequately maintained is a common recommendation for virtual teams (Malhotra et al., 2007). Structural supports have a stronger influence on

performance in virtual teams than in non-virtual teams (Hoch & Kozlowski, 2012). Leaders hold a pivotal role in enhancing personal and informal connections among virtual team members, a frequently overlooked aspect that deserves increased attention (Schmidt, 2014). Leaders in effective virtual teams encouraged team members to share personal tales (Malhotra et al., 2007). Personal tales were viewed as a way to connect team members better and get to know each other informally, which may be easier in face-to-face teams (Malhotra et al., 2007). More effective global business teams engaged in more informal and personal ways than less productive teams (Saphiere, 1996). Stronger human interactions are viewed as one approach to increasing the productivity of virtual teams (Hart & McLeod, 2003).

In light of the pandemic, the rise of virtual teams became a focal point as organizations, including government offices, shifted to remote work and virtual teams gained prominence. This shift requires leadership adaptability in government settings, where the traditional notion of in-person work faced disruption. The challenges government organizations face during COVID-19, coupled with the rise of virtual teams, underscores the importance of effective leadership in navigating organizational crises.

The positive impact of remote work on performance during the pandemic is intricately tied to factors such as proactive coping and LMX (Chang et al., 2022). Proactive coping, which involves turning obstacles into positive experiences, was identified as a significant factor in enhancing work performance. Furthermore, a strong LMX, characterized by managers understanding employees' job problems and needs, is identified as a key element in driving improved work performance within remote work settings (Chang et al., 2022).

## **Theoretical Framework: Leader-Member Exchange**

In organizational leadership, LMX theory stands out as a compelling and valuable framework, shedding light on the intricate dynamics between leaders and their team members. The fundamental concept of this relationship-focused leadership model is that when leaders and followers build mature, mutually beneficial partnerships, effective leadership is achieved (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1991). LMX is distinguished from other theories on leadership because of its emphasis on the dyadic interaction between a member and a leader (Omlion-Hodges & Ptacek, 2021). Moreover, it is argued that “the quality of the relationship that develops between a leader and a follower is predictive of outcomes at the individual, group, and organizational levels” (Gerstner & Day, 1997, p. 827).

LMX is both transactional and transformational, as argued by Graen and Uhl-Bien (1991). In the context of transformational leadership, there is a dynamic where followers actively participate in a common vision for the future and personally identify strongly with the leader (Yammarino & Bass, 1990; Burns, 1978). Transformational leaders work to expand the interests of followers, motivating them to surpass their self-interests for the collective benefit (Yammarino & Bass, 1990). Transactional leadership emphasizes performance-based rewards, addressing issues when standards aren't met, and ensuring continuity as goals are achieved by rewarding based on performance and intervening when necessary. (Bass, 1990). LMX begins with strangers engaging in limited social transactions, progressing to partnerships through a transformational process (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1991). Material exchange is distinct from social exchange, and LMX, when based on material exchange, resembles “managership” or “supervision.” LMX is deemed both transactional and transformational, representing a dyadic social exchange

transitioning from transactional to transformational leadership as relationships advance (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1991).

In studies of LMX, leaders purposefully cultivate unique relationships within their teams. That is to say, leaders create high-quality, trust-based, affect-based, and respect-based connections with a selected team group and have a lower-quality interchange with other members (Gerstner & Day, 1997). Positive dyadic interactions in the workplace contribute to heightened task motivation, increased emotional support, and greater job autonomy, ultimately enhancing overall engagement (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). In a meta-analytical study, Martin and colleagues (2016), using 100 samples, revealed a significant positive correlation between LMX and task performance. Additionally, they identified trust, motivation, empowerment, and job satisfaction as key mediators in the linkage between LMX and both task and citizenship performance. Considered a resource exchange model between leaders and members, LMX proposes that members reciprocate by offering equivalent resources, for example, sharing information with the leader in exchange for being rewarded or gaining status (Wilson et al., 2010). Reciprocity is a fundamental aspect of LMX theory, but effective and valuable exchanges are built on general rather than immediate reciprocity (Sparrowe & Liden, 1997). In essence, within high-quality exchanges, members and leaders are driven to mutually benefit each other without necessarily keeping close track of their exchanges.

The development of the leader-member relationship involves a three-step process: role-taking, role-making, and role-routinization. In the initial stage of role-taking, the leader assigns tasks and responsibilities to the new employee and evaluates their performance (Gerstner & Day, 1997). This phase also involves assessing how well the employee integrates into the workgroup (Graen & Scandura, 1987). The subsequent stage, role-making, is more driven by the employee.

During this phase, the employee actively works to shape their role, both overtly and indirectly, to better match their skills and aspirations (Omilion-Hodges & Ptacek, 2021). Role routinization marks the last stage of relationship development in LMX, where the relationship becomes predictable and stable (Omilion-Hodges & Ptacek, 2021). Both implicit and verbal negotiations have stopped at this stage, making it difficult to change the relationship's nature, whether for better or worse (Omilion-Hodges & Ptacek, 2021). This signifies that the bonds between leaders and members are generated through communication and are a direct outcome.

The emergence, progression, and maintenance of a relationship is facilitated through dyadic communicative interactions between the leader and the member. Transitioning from the intricate process of LMX relationship development, a leader's effectiveness becomes a critical focal point in organizational dynamics (Sosik et al., 2005). As the bonds between leaders and members take shape through the three-step process, the significance of effective communication as a pivotal instrument becomes evident (Sheer, 2015). This communicative foundation serves as a precursor to understanding the broader implications of leader effectiveness in steering followers towards desired goals and mobilizing resources (Sonmez Cakir & Adiguzel, 2020). In essence, the success of the LMX relationship, forged through communication, lays the groundwork for evaluating the broader impact of leader effectiveness on various facets of organizational performance and employee outcomes.

Leader effectiveness is characterized by the ability to direct followers toward specific goals, while utilizing resources and power (Sonmez Cakir & Adiguzel, 2020). This effectiveness is heavily influenced by the outcomes and consequences of what the leader does for their followers and the organization (Yukl, 2006). The most common measure of leadership effectiveness is the extent to which the company accomplishes its goals and fulfills its tasks

(Erkutlu, 2008). Within organizations, leader effectiveness plays a crucial role in organizations as it influences various aspects of employee performance and organizational success (Sonmez Cakir & Adiguzel, 2020). The study by Sonmez Cakir and Adiguzel (2020) examined 400 white-collar employees from diverse departments to assess the impact of knowledge sharing on performance and strategy. They found a positive relationship between information sharing and leader effectiveness. Their research indicated that the work performance of employees within the organization was positively affected by leader effectiveness as well as by knowledge sharing behavior. One way to evaluate effectiveness is by determining their ability to meet the expectations and needs of followers, contribute to their development, and establish good relations with them. Leader effectiveness positively work performance and organization performance (Sonmez Cakir & Adiguzel, 2020).

The relationships between leaders and their members are pivotal for organizations. The connections leaders cultivate with their staff hold great significance for various crucial organizational outcomes. Nevertheless, the nature of LMX is likely to manifest differently within each organizational context (Omilion-Hodges & Ptacek, 2021). Existing literature abounds with discoveries that establish connections between specific leadership traits and approaches and the characteristics of different organizational types and sectors (Omilion-Hodges & Ptacek, 2021). The connection between LMX and leadership dynamics shows how leader-member relationships impact success in different organizations. Ultimately, it is within this interplay that LMX emerges as an indispensable force shaping organizational dynamics and outcomes.

Given that successful leadership and the establishment of strong individual LMX relationships hinge on various contexts and individual members' unique desires and requirements, the role of communication requires some contemplation. Effective leadership

hinges on a leader's capacity to adapt their communication to each follower (Johnson & Hackman, 2018). However, this is not always straightforward, and mastering this skill often demands a considerable learning curve. Drawing inspiration from information-processing theory, which outlines how leaders can select effective communication styles for each circumstance based on their information processing and categorization approaches, there are several reasons why leaders should enhance their contextual communication skills (Johnson & Hackman, 2018). These communication abilities empower employees and cultivate the understanding and essential trust needed to motivate others to follow a leader (Barret, 2006) and even improve employee commitment (Mayfield & Mayfield, 2002). This ability becomes increasingly crucial in navigating the challenges posed by the sudden adoption of enforced remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic, knowing the unique demands it places on leaders and the need for adaptive communication strategies.

### **Summary**

In this literature review I explored the multifaceted nature of leadership especially in the context of organizational crises. It started by establishing leadership as a communication-centric process and then explored crisis leadership, detailing the essential stages of crisis management. As remote work became a dominant mode of working during the pandemic, the review examined both its benefits and challenges, alongside the concept of virtual leadership, which demands new strategies for maintaining team cohesion and productivity in an environment where face to face interactions do not exist or are very limited. Finally, the review of LMX theory emphasized the importance of the dyadic relationships between leaders and their followers.

## Research Question

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, organizational leaders found themselves at the forefront of unimagined challenges, which required adaptive leadership approaches and effective communication strategies. One aspect influencing leadership during this period was the sudden transition to remote work. The stressful and uncertain circumstances that COVID-19 brought affected all aspects of life, including work. Leaders and followers were placed in a context with many new challenges, and the way leaders navigated these complexities and transitioned through this time with their teams is the focus of this study. This research seeks to explore leadership endeavors and strategies in leading teams during the pandemic and understand the interplay between leader-member dynamics before, during, and after the crisis. Understanding how leader-member relationships shaped leadership strategies during the crisis is essential for gaining insights into the adaptive strategies used by leaders. Exploring what leaders actually did during this time to navigate the unexpected challenges of the pandemic and whether the pandemic influenced their relationships with their followers, offers new insights into leadership practices during a crisis. In short, this question aims to explore the ways in which leadership was enacted through an extended crisis period with a focus on the relational aspect of leadership. Therefore, the question guiding this study is: *How did leaders enact leadership going through the modality change during the COVID-19 crisis?*

## **Method**

The primary goal of this research project was to delve into practices of leadership within the context of organizational crises, specifically during the COVID-19 pandemic. As nearly five years have transpired since the outbreak of this virus, we find ourselves in the post-crisis phase, which can provide valuable insights from a retrospective examination of the period and the strategies leaders employed. In this research I aimed to bridge the gap between crisis leadership and virtual leadership by adding the context of an extended crisis period that was marked by a change in work modality, and also offers a focus on the dyadic relationship between leaders and followers during this period to explore the ways these relationships were influenced by the extended crisis. Moreover, I explored leadership and crisis communication and leaders' experiences during prolonged exposure to crisis. Additionally, I analyzed how leadership facilitated the transition to remote or hybrid work arrangements necessitated by the pandemic, examined how communication occurred between leaders and followers in a remote work setting during the COVID-19 pandemic, and explored the challenges posed by the transition to remote work for both leaders and members. In this methods section, I will outline the type of study that was conducted, go over procedures, discuss my role as a researcher, provide data on the participants, and give a brief overview of the analysis process.

### **Researcher's Role**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, my own career underwent significant changes. I began working remotely, putting in long hours, and joined a newly established online institute a year after the outbreak. I found myself in a unique situation where I did not have the opportunity to interact with my colleagues or my supervisor in-person due to health restrictions and quarantine measures. This period prompted me to reflect deeply on the fundamental differences between

this new organizational structure and the conventional workplace dynamics. As a teacher of group classes and a supervisor, I encountered the challenges of managing people remotely, a paradigm shift that prompted me to consider the nuances of leadership in such a context.

Additionally, during my seven months as a communication and marketing intern at the City and County of Denver (CCD), I navigated a role that included in-person and virtual work within a small, daily communicating team. Despite joining after the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, I observed the team's deep involvement in communicating crucial information related to COVID-19 regulations for Denver residents and managing internal communications within the Department of Technology Services. What stood out was the team's adeptness with virtual work despite acknowledging the challenges of COVID-related isolation. Surprisingly, the idea of returning to in-person work more than two days a week was met with hesitation, revealing lasting impacts on work preferences.

Moreover, my internship provided me with invaluable insights into the diverse experiences of individuals during the pandemic. Through interactions with colleagues and the stories they shared, I learned that each person had a unique journey and perspective on the impact of COVID-19. This exposure to various narratives prompted me to explore different leadership approaches. During my professional experience, I had the opportunity to shadow various teams. I developed a deep interest in leadership dynamics and its relationship with the challenges posed by the pandemic. My experiences have led me to approach the research with a more analytical and empathetic lens, understanding that the relationships between leaders and team members played a pivotal role during the COVID-19 crisis.

## **Research Approach**

This is a qualitative study of leadership during COVID-19 crisis. To conduct this study, I adopted a qualitative methodology and conducted semi-structured interviews with participants. Qualitative research is created through descriptions that enlighten readers on the more profound fundamental principles of a specific human experience (Thorne, 2000). Through interviews, participants can provide their opinions, motivations, and experiences (Tracy, 2020). With a topic similar to this, where human experience is central, interviews are an appropriate approach. Interviews are a helpful instrument for gathering background data and information on issues that are difficult to observe or are quickly accessible (Tracy, 2020). The COVID-19 experience in organizations, and even in private life, varied from one individual to another, and interviews open up a space where I, as the researcher, can ask participants to clarify their actions and viewpoints by offering reasons, explanations and justifications (Tracy, 2020). The semi-structured interview encouraged a relaxed and flexible conversation between the researcher and the participant (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2018). This method helped build a connection, gain personal insight into the participant's viewpoint, and jointly shaped the interview setting (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Furthermore, these interviews encouraged participants to reflect on the past and its influence on their current leadership approaches and experiences.

## **Participants**

This study focused on leadership and required participants to hold a team leadership role within their organization, where they had direct reports. Eligible participants had remained with the same organization since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and had led teams during the COVID-19 crisis. To be specific, it was required that participants be with the same organization from January 2020 to January 2022. This ensured that the leaders had stayed in the

same organization for some time before the pandemic and through the period when they returned to a “new normal.” Moreover, including this criterion allowed me as the researcher to capture their experiences both during the peak of the crisis and as they adapted to the changes brought about by COVID-19.

Additionally, participants were team leaders who have experienced a shift in the modality of work, whether it be from in-person to hybrid or remote, or any other variation. This shift in work mode enabled a more targeted exploration of the impact of remote and hybrid work on the dynamics of interpersonal relationships during the COVID-19 pandemic. Lastly, to guarantee the maturity and comprehension required for significant contributions to the study, participants had to be adults 18 years or older. English language competency was also necessary for efficient communication during the study process.

To identify eligible participants for this study, I employed purposeful and snowball sampling techniques. To start the recruitment process I reached out to my connections who I thought were a good fit for the study (See Appendix A for recruitment email) and then with their help started snowball sampling (see Appendix B). I invited those who fit the criteria and express interest to participate in the study to one-on-one interviews. Additionally, I posted recruitment material (see Appendix C) on my personal social media accounts (LinkedIn, Instagram, and Facebook) to expand my reach within my professional network and attracted potential participants.

Interested individuals were identified based on their responses to these communications and through the screening process. Participants were also asked to take a screening survey that was designed to ensure eligibility based on the criteria before conducting interviews (See Appendix D). The screening survey was completed by 48 individuals, however, only 12

qualified. Altogether, 11 of the participants were recruited through purposeful sampling and one was recruited through snowball sampling. All participants received a virtual \$20 Amazon gift card through email once the interview ended.

For this study, I conducted a total of 12 interviews. Participants' ages ranged from 28 to 59 years old ( $M = 43.6$ ;  $SD = 7.1$ ), showing a slightly younger demographic than is usual for leaders, which is 46 years old (Zippia, 2024). Among the participants, nine identified themselves as White (75%), one identified as Black or African American (8.3%), one identified as Middle-Eastern (8.3%) and one identified as Hispanic (8.3%). Participants represented a total of seven different industries, with an average tenure of 10.6 years. Among the participants, ten were with the same organization before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Of these ten, two were promoted in the later stages of the pandemic when the crisis was not as urgent. However, the roles included in the table reflect the positions they held during the COVID-19 crisis. The other two participants have now left the organization they were in during the pandemic. See Appendix E for a demographic visual.

### **Data Collection**

All interviews were conducted online. However, participants had the choice to choose between platforms of Teams and Zoom. I chose verbal consent for the study and when beginning the virtual call, I read the consent form (see Appendix F) and got consent, and then with their permission audio recorded and transcribed the interviews through the virtual meeting software. Interviews ranged from 31 to 70 minutes ( $M = 50.6$ ;  $SD = 9.7$ ).

To answer the Research Question (How did leaders enact leadership through modality changes caused by COVID-19?) I asked participants different types of questions. We delved into a range of topics, including the experiences of participants during the transition to hybrid/remote

work, the specific challenges encountered in leading teams within this context, the communication strategies employed by leaders in distributing information to their teams, the influences the relationship leaders and their followers had prior to COVID-19 outbreak had on how leadership handled members during and after the pandemic, and the strategies used to maintain stability within their teams. To understand the how the work modality change affected them and their team I asked questions like, “what was it like to work during the pandemic?” and “what were the advantages or challenges you faced leading your team as a result of hybrid/virtual work settings?”. To understand the unique challenges they faced during the pandemic I asked questions like “what kind of pressure did you feel as a leader during a time of crisis?”, “what were some of the key challenges you encountered in managing and motivating your team members remotely during the pandemic?”. The full list of questions I used during my interview can be found in Appendix G.

### **Data Analysis**

To analyze my data, I employed Tracy’s (2020) phronetic iterative approach, which “aims to result in use-inspired, practical research that not only builds theory but also provides guidance on social practice and action” (Tracy, 2020, p. 210). This approach assumes that perception is inherently tied to a self-reflective subject position, with the social and historical context preceding individual motives and actions (Tracy, 2020, p. 210). In this context, communication shapes the identities of both researchers and the subjects under study (Tracy, 2020, p. 210).

Before analysis, I cleaned the transcripts generated by Teams and Zoom software. Then I used analytic memos to start the iterative analysis process. These memos were simply reflective pieces of writing where I documented my initial thoughts, interpretation about each individual interview. They served as “sites of conversation with [myself] about the data” (Clarke, 2005, p.

202). Additionally, I conducted initial reflections after each participant interview to capture immediate insights and observations, which informed subsequent stages of analysis (Tracy, 2020). I then engaged in a thorough reading of the data to identify preliminary themes and topics.

Primary-cycle coding involved an emic, or emergent, reading of the data, which means allowing the codes to arise naturally from the content without being influenced by pre-existing theories or concepts (Tracy, 2020, p. 219). This process included “open coding,” or “line-by-line coding,” (Tracy, 2020, p. 219). During this phase, I assigned descriptive labels to segments of the data to capture their essence, focusing on the “what” aspect present in the data (Tracy, 2020, p. 213). Primary codes, such as motivation, communication, work-life balance, and mental health, captured the core themes related to the participants’ experiences during remote work. These primary codes were then further refined into secondary codes to provide more granular insights, such as intentional communication, engagement challenges, and support by providing resources. Through this process, I identified key patterns that reflected how individuals navigated the transition to remote work, focusing on engagement, leadership strategies, and emotional well-being and safety.

In the secondary-cycle coding, I shifted to a more analytical approach, integrating theoretical knowledge and interpretive creativity. This phase involved categorizing first-level codes into broader, more abstract second-level codes, which required a deeper understanding of the data and the theoretical framework underpinning the study. Second-level codes aim to explain, theorize, and synthesize the data, identifying patterns, rules, or cause-effect progressions (Tracy, 2020, p. 225). An important aspect of the phronetic iterative approach is the ongoing engagement with relevant literature throughout the analysis process. I developed secondary codes that provided more detailed insights into participants' experiences. These secondary codes

were grouped into my final themes, namely support, intentional communication, safety, and team relationships. The strategies captured in these themes show how leaders engaged with crisis management and adapted to the changing needs of their teams (see Appendix H). Tracy (2020) emphasizes the importance of iteratively moving between the data and existing theories or research to enrich the analysis and ensure theoretical grounding. I revisited the literature on crisis leadership and leader member exchange theory at this stage and also later stages, and it helped me to refine my codes, interpret emerging patterns more accurately, and position my findings within the broader scholarly context (Tracy, 2020, p. 224).

To make the coding process more efficient, I used the MAXQDA software. This tool allowed me to systematically organize and search the codes, view related quotes, and color-code similar codes. Using this software, I was able to highlight and group similar quotes and provided a more structured system which consequently helped in visualizing the data's thematic structure (Tracy, 2020). Throughout the coding process, I used the digital codebook in MAXQDA, which served as a reference guide for the codes used in the analysis.

### ***Ethical Considerations***

I hold a certification from the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) for Colorado State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB), underscoring my commitment to conducting research ethically. Throughout the analysis process, I was careful about the way I presented the participant data and demographic information to ensure their privacy. To protect the privacy and anonymity of the participants, the collected data was first transcribed and then stored on a password-protected drive, which is accessible to me and my advisor as the PI. Pseudonyms were utilized in research materials or publications to further protect the participants' identities. In addition, I submitted an IRB protocol form to ensure that all research procedures

align with established ethical guidelines and regulations. I recognize the significance of human subject protection and take all necessary measures to maintain compliance with IRB protocols throughout the research process.

To summarize, this study used a qualitative approach with semi-structured interviews to explore leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic. Twelve leaders shared their experiences managing teams and navigating remote or hybrid work. Using Tracy's phronetic iterative approach, primary themes like motivation, communication, and work-life balance emerged, which were further refined into secondary themes such as intentional communication and support.

## **Findings**

The study identified four key themes: intentional communication, support, safety, and leadership and team relationships. The primary goal of this study was to examine how leaders adapted their leadership strategies and navigated their relationships with their team members during the COVID-19 crisis. These themes helped answer the research question: How did leaders enact leadership going through the modality change during the COVID-19 crisis? In the following chapter, I will present the key findings related to this question, introduce several sub-themes, and provide excerpts from the participants' interviews to illustrate these insights.

### **Intentional Communication**

Intentional communication emerged as the most prominent theme throughout the study, serving as a foundational element that permeated other themes such as support, safety, and team relationships. Participants consistently highlighted the critical role of deliberate and thoughtful communication in navigating the challenges of virtual work settings during the pandemic. This heightened intentionality was not just a standalone concept but was intricately linked to creating a supportive environment, ensuring safety, and was present during leader-member interactions with both positive and negative team members. Please see appendix I for a visual representation of the themes.

Virtual work settings demand a more intentional approach to communication. This intentionality serves various purposes for different leaders. Nearly all participants emphasized heightened intentionality in their communications during the pandemic, employing diverse strategies. This included communication aimed at enhancing employee engagement, prioritizing the person over the worker, communicating the right amount of information in uncertain times, and navigating the balance between overcommunication and providing necessary information.

## *Intention to Engage*

The pandemic introduced numerous uncertainties for companies and employees, and the sudden shift to remote work further added to the challenges. Many team members found it difficult to stay as engaged as they were before, which led to leaders being concerned. In response, leaders adopted intentional communication strategies to actively manage their teams and keep them more engaged. By being deliberate in their interactions, leaders sought to bridge the gap created by physical distance to maintain a motivated team.

Intentional communication is vital for maintaining team engagement during remote work, requiring leaders to address potential disengagement and ensure that every team member feels involved. Leadership during remote work requires intentional strategies to ensure team members are engaged and connected, particularly those who might be overlooked. For Alex (please see Appendix E for participants demographic table), this intentionality was mostly directed at those employees “who tended to get lost in the crowd.” In earlier stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, “in many organizations there were not strict rules for keeping the cameras on during virtual meetings,” and this lack of enforcement led to certain issues within Alex’s team, prompting him to be more intentional about addressing them. He said that he would specifically “call out” some people in the (virtual) room, in an effort to be more systemic and deliberate:

I had to be more intentional, especially for those employees who tended to get lost in the crowd or sit in the back of the room during meetings. You could visually call them out or note their presence. It required a more methodical approach in team meetings to identify who was present and who wasn’t participating. Then, I really had to find opportunities to get them involved in the conversation or the discussion... So, I found that to be a really effective tool.

With this method, he could have a better understanding of who was present and who was not, who joined in the conversation and who did not, so he felt “calling people out” created

opportunities for them to get more involved in the conversation. After a few months he made it a requirement for his team members to keep their cameras on for the “engagement and also the connectiveness.” He emphasized that turning on the cameras “is just a sign of respect. But also, an indication that we might not all be in the same room, but we’re all actively participating in this meeting together.” As he asked his team to keep their cameras on and engage more in conversations, he also pushed himself to do the same because he felt it was a more effective way to conduct meetings and enhance employee engagement:

But again, I’m naturally, probably, well, not probably, I’m definitely more introverted by nature. I don’t like being on camera. I don’t like public speaking or any of that, but during that time, I really had to show up as a leader. Be more motivational. Inspirational even, right? That’s what people were looking for, so that I would say, helped me grow in that respect too.

He felt by asking them to keep their cameras on and engage in conversations more often, he was showing up for his team as a leader. Reflecting on this experience, Alex acknowledged that stepping out of his comfort zone not only contributed to his growth as a leader but also strengthened his ability to connect with and inspire his team.

Merriam was another leader who used intentionality to address disengaged team members who would not participate in meetings. She tried to be intentional about asking individuals who are really not chiming in much in a conversation or meetings, and followed up by asking them questions like “Has anything changed in your situation? Is anything different? Can I help you with anything?” This intentionality was a way for her to make sure she was looking out for her team as she believed “intentional communication was pretty crucial during that COVID time.” Merriam’s questions were designed to identify any changes in her team members’ circumstances that might be affecting their participation. She shared that she really wanted to understand and address specific issues that individuals might be facing and help them

be more engaged. Moreover, by asking direct questions, Merriam ensured that every team member felt seen, which she believed helped maintain engagement. She added, “I think just we are a pretty close team, and we have a good dynamic anyway.” By being more intentional Merriam felt she was “looking out for my team as people which I think was pretty crucial during that COVID time.”

Intentional communication became essential for keeping teams engaged during the pandemic. Leaders adopted deliberate strategies to counteract the disengagement risks of remote work, such as encouraging active participation and checking in on specific individuals. These efforts were in place to ensure that, despite having a new team setting due to the sudden shift to remote work, team members remained involved and engaged.

### ***Person First, Worker Second***

Intentional communication prioritizes understanding each individual’s unique circumstances and emphasizes their human aspects over their role as employees. This humanistic approach acknowledges the importance of addressing personal well-being, concerns, and individual needs before focusing on work-related tasks. During times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, this strategy becomes essential.

A notable aspect of my conversation with Merriam was when she said, “the biggest thing is just remembering that everyone is a person, and you have to put the person first and care about the person rather than just the worker.” Intentionality can be focusing on each person and their uniqueness and communicating with them considering that. The implementation of this method was an important factor in Merriam’s leadership. To her it meant seeing each member of her team primarily as a “person” rather than a “worker.” Similar to many other leaders, she talked about how in virtual settings certain things get missed, and as a result makes intentionality

become paramount. Merriam believed intentional communication was more catered to a single person and their view on virtual work. She recollected the times during the pandemic when one of her team members had a baby, or somebody else who got married, and that when it came to these events it was a little bit harder to celebrate them compared to when you were a team in the office together. In order for these things not to be forgotten she tried to create a space where people could chat about these celebrations. She further discussed her experience on intentional communication during the pandemic and said:

It's a skill. and it's a kind of a skill that you have to practice no matter at what point you are in your career. You know you're rushing, you're doing a lot of things, you've got a lot going on, everybody has big priority lists and lots on their plate. And so sometimes it feels forced to do ice breakers or silly things that don't feel as important. But I would argue that they are really important. I think you have to have those conversations, and you learn just as much about the celebrations that you're having with your team as the things that they're struggling with. So I think that's the biggest thing is just being really intentional about really connecting with the people. Just making sure you understand everyone's style and how they were going to approach remote work.

By creating a space for team members to share personal milestones, Merriam ensured that these important events were acknowledged and celebrated, so she could reinforce the idea that her team members were valued as individuals, not just workers. She also shared how this was a challenge within communications because she did not want her team to feel like they had to participate in these chats all the time:

It's definitely a challenge within communications. You know, you need uninterrupted work time, but if everyone's gonna be on the chat and having a whole entire conversation it can be hard. We had to kind of remind people it's OK to turn that off for a while or let us know need to not be bothered for this period of time. And so I'd say that was kind of a challenge and an opportunity to just understand and help people. I think was a challenge for everyone. Honestly, we all kind of had to identify our own styles in that, and so, you know, once you know your style, how do you communicate it to other people? I think that was a little part of it too. And then how do I as a leader help them respect one another's styles?

Merriam's words show the complexity and necessity of intentional communication in remote work settings. Her approach facilitated personal connections and also respected individual work styles and boundaries.

Understanding everyone's unique situations is a form of communication that can make us more humanistic. Natalie reflects, "the pandemic made us a lot more humanistic," which she found thrilling as it aligned with her compassionate management style. Natalie advocates for making work more humanistic, highlighting the importance of compassion in leadership. She notes, "I just needed to really be even more compassionate," recognizing that leaders must remember they do not know what people are going through. Similar to Merriam, Natalie tried to allow for the personal matters to be talked about but also emphasized the importance of balancing personal and professional communication, saying, "I was balancing letting them share some of that personal stuff that's going on and how it's affecting them, but making sure that that's a balance of not just being like, well, you're not responsible for anything." This echoes Merriam's statement and acknowledges that the pandemic affected people differently, requiring leaders to be conscious of individual circumstances. Natalie recognized the diverse circumstances of her team members and aimed to accommodate them. However, she also ensured that personal issues did not overshadow professional responsibilities, because to her it is important to find a balance between understanding personal situations and upholding work expectations.

Sarah's approach was also a result of understanding the unique situation that each person might have. Like others, she first highlighted impact of in-person communication, stating:

When you talk to someone, they hear you, they see your facial expression, they see your smile...it makes a huge difference in them believing in you...In text, there's so much misunderstanding. You always have to say thank you or send one of those little emojis to

make sure they know I'm not saying this in an angry voice, so don't worry. I'm still very flexible, kind and welcoming towards you, so you can always talk to me.

She recognized that the missing contextual cues in virtual communication make it so hard to understand what mood each person is in. Therefore, intentionality made Sarah's communications with her team even more friendly than before with the intention of minimizing misunderstandings.

When you're at home, whether sitting or driving, your mood can vary, and how people communicate with you may feel different. In a workplace, you expect both friendliness and straightforwardness because you understand the context. However, outside of that context, when someone asks you to do something, you might feel reluctant or think it's after hours.

Outside the workplace setting, Sarah recognized the challenge of not being physically present to observe her team members' varying moods and situations. This made her more attentive to the fact that each person might be facing unique circumstances. As a leader, Sarah emphasized the importance of being mindful and prioritizing individuals in her communications. She aimed to empathize with her team members' situations, ensuring her approach considered their current challenges and emotions.

Morris' case also reinforces that intentional communication is fundamentally about understanding and addressing the unique situations of each team member. He shared that he had to be intentional by just listening to what his team members had to say, not about work, but about their life:

There was a lot of communication, a lot of, you know, Teams meetings and just really sometimes it wasn't even about work, it was just listening to how people were doing at home and hearing about their family as our kids doing OK how was it, you know, home schooling, your kids.

He further discussed the importance of having open lines of communication during the uncertain times of the pandemic. He felt as a leader it was his job to:

Just listen, talk to people, do the best [he] could, and avoid the political angles that became of COVID and really just try to be positive...and again hear them out and listen to them...the struggles that others were having within the team.

He admitted to being anxious and stressed himself, but that he is not the one to share these things with his team. However, he had to show up for them and let them communicate with him freely:

If I had some people on my team that were getting pretty anxious, it was my job to spend the time with them to talk them off the ledge and ease their concerns, both from a 'do I still have a job' perspective to 'what happens if I get sick' or whatever. So, it was just keeping the lines of communication as open as I could.

For Morris, who has kids of his own and was experiencing anxiety, it was important to make his team feel he understood their unique situation and that was more intentional with the way he communicated with them. This intentionality allowed Morris to address his team's anxieties directly and provide them with reassurance and support specific to their concerns. By putting the person first and considering their unique situations, he tried to show this team they could communicate freely with him.

Leaders navigated the complexities of remote work in the pandemic by focusing on the individual needs and their circumstances. They emphasized the importance of empathy and open communication, and recognized the unique challenges faced by each person. By creating spaces for personal connection, being mindful of diverse work styles, and addressing anxieties directly, leaders can reinforce the value of seeing their team members as people first and workers second.

### ***Overcommunication***

While overcommunication might carry a negative connotation, within the pandemic environment, it became a critical strategy for leaders to engage in intentional communication.

Leaders recognized that, in such uncertain times, ensuring everyone was on the same page was more important than ever. Overcommunication, in this sense, meant being extra clear about tasks and expectations. By overcommunicating, they aimed to reduce uncertainty, and keep their teams aligned.

Overcommunication was needed during the crisis to ensure that directions and deliverables were clear and understood by all team members. Zachery shared his experience about how virtual settings require a different way of communication. The shift to remote work required Zachery to rethink his communication strategies fundamentally. He adapted his communication style to suit remote settings better, moving away from his traditional, more informal methods:

I have no shame when it comes to dressing up in character or being, do the crazy thing. Oh, you want me to jump off the stage? OK, I'll do that. You know, whatever it is to get a reaction. But again, in a remote scenario, that's not, it doesn't have the same effect and so when you're doing team meetings on a video and not everybody has the same Internet, I had to adapt to make sure that we were ultra clear in communication as opposed to just being fun and chummy.

To ensure clarity, he became much clearer in what he was saying and often “a little over communicative.” He explains that in remote settings, “you have to be clear and intentional with all that communication,” as opposed to relying on the informal cues and documentation that work in face-to-face settings. This shift involved making sure that any communication or documents sent were clear and comprehensible, anticipating that team members might have different interpretations, and ensuring that his messages were understood as intended.

This overcommunication happened in Eddie's team as well. Eddie mentioned that he thinks of himself as a “hands-off leader,” meaning that he is not a leader who likes to babysit anyone. He works in an environment where he believes everybody is an adult and they are aware

that there are things that need to be done. But he felt the need to communicate more intentionally and more than he would have liked:

There were maybe more of those touch point meetings set up than I normally would have liked. So that was maybe a way to, I don't want to say micromanage, but you know, just making sure that I'm on top of employees who needed to provide information and making sure that they were doing what they were supposed to.

He made sure he was clearly communicating what “the deliverables were, and what the expectations were.” He mentioned that a lot of his efforts involved project planning, ensuring that clear deliverables and timelines were communicated to everyone in the team so that everybody was aware of what to expect during uncertain time of the pandemic.

Similarly, Sean echoed that he had to talk a lot more to his team about everything, “I think we talked so much! The communication definitely went from here to here. We started to basically overcommunicate everything. So everybody knew what was what, what was planned and expected, and why we were doing it.” The overcommunication was to reduce any additional uncertainty in a situation where there a lot of uncertainty naturally exists due to the pandemic.

Overcommunication during the pandemic became a strategy to ensure clarity, reduce uncertainty, and maintain alignment within remote teams. Leaders like Zachery, Eddie, and Sean adapted their communication approaches to the virtual environment by being more explicit and thorough in their messaging. Leaders emphasized the necessity of increased communication to ensure everyone was informed and aligned during that time. Overcommunication, in this context, became a tool to ensure that all team members clearly understood tasks and expectations.

### ***To Share or Not to Share***

In an uncertain time like the pandemic where information and policies could change in a matter of hours, intentionality can just mean being mindful of how much you share with your team. Finding the right balance between oversharing and not sharing enough was crucial. During

a crisis, both approaches can have negative impacts. Oversharing can overwhelm employees, while not sharing enough can leave them feeling uncertain and anxious. Leaders had to carefully navigate this balance to ensure that their teams were well-informed without causing unnecessary stress.

During a crisis, leaders must carefully balance the frequency and content of their communication to keep teams informed without causing overwhelm. Chad became preoccupied with the question of “how much should I communicate to my team?” This was especially hard as he was in meetings with the many other leaders who then shared updates from the city, the university policies as whole, and the college. On top of that, there was the updates/news from the department itself that he had to share. Chad’s communication strategy had to evolve in response to the dynamic nature of his work environment. Before the pandemic he tried to limit his communication to once a week, in the form of an email that contained everything his team needed to know. He reflected on the situation in the beginning of the pandemic:

That works under the conditions in which everything’s kind of plugging along as we would expect. Well, things weren’t plugging along as we expected and the landscape into which we were teaching, which we were organizing ourselves into, which we were doing our scholarship all was changing on a weekly basis on a daily basis. Sometimes on an hourly basis, like substantially changing. So and I was getting emails at this furious rate saying ‘now we’re doing this differently’, or ‘this new thing has come up.’

This shift necessitated a reassessment of how often to communicate, balancing the need to keep the team informed without overwhelming them. He explained he would often receive requests to communicate additional details but chose to limit his updates to prevent overload. Instead, he curated the essential information into structured updates, transitioning from weekly emails to “two or three times a week” as needed. Chad also emphasized the importance of content in his

communications, focusing on two primary elements: essential knowledge and emotional acknowledgment. He stated:

And I decided that I would communicate two things. One, here is the knowledge you need to have out of this email...And the other thing was that I need to communicate something about...what I see about you, what I recognize about you. Almost all of those emails also acknowledged, 'Hey, this might be a little scary,' or, 'Gee whiz, we're working really hard,' or, 'I see how carefully you're working to take care of your students,' or similar sentiments.

This approach exemplifies how Chad intentionally communicated by balancing frequency and content to meet the team's needs with the intention of not causing unnecessary stress. Compared to the past, the increased frequency of updates might have felt like too much sharing, but Chad made efforts to tailor his messages to be concise and relevant.

During the pandemic, when information and policies were rapidly changing, Merriam's role as the leader of the communications team involved carefully balancing how much information to share between upper leadership and employees. Intentional communication within organizations requires a thoughtful approach to bridge the gap between upper leadership and employees. Merriam used intentionality to ensure mutual understanding between employees and executives. She emphasized the importance of voicing employee concerns and realities to company leadership, noting:

We felt that we needed to be the voice of the employees in some situations, helping leadership understand that many employees have kids at home who are trying to do homework while they are trying to work. Leaders who may have children out of the house might not fully grasp these challenges. This presented an opportunity for us, as the communications team, to provide leadership with a reality check on what employees were experiencing.

Moreover, she pointed out the necessity of conveying leadership perspectives to employees to foster mutual understanding. She and her team worked to help leaders explain their viewpoints to

employees, making sure they appreciated and understood the executives' challenges and decisions. At the same time, she had to carefully decide how much and in what way to share employee concerns with upper leadership to maintain a constructive dialogue. This intentional approach aimed to create a balanced and informed dialogue within the organization. Merriam felt her team had a unique position in all of this highlighted the unique position of the communications team in facilitating this exchange, remarking that this executive communication component offered both challenges and opportunities. She stated that this provided employees with a greater appreciation for the importance of communication channels, therefore highlighting the role of intentional communication in navigating changes within organizations.

To summarize, the theme of intentional communication highlights the deliberate efforts leaders made during the pandemic to keep their teams engaged and informed. Leaders recognized the unique challenges of remote work and the uncertainties that came with it, and they responded by adopting tailored communication strategies. Whether it was engaging employees who were at risk of becoming disengaged, prioritizing the person over the worker, or balancing how much information to share, leaders used intentionality to navigate these challenges. Overcommunication became a tool to ensure clarity and reduce uncertainty, while careful consideration of what and how much to share helped maintain trust and prevent anxiety. By being intentional in their approach, leaders were able to keep their teams aligned, reduce misunderstandings, and create a sense of stability during the pandemic.

## **Support**

Support emerged as a central theme across the interviews. In this study, it is defined as leaders' proactive efforts to assist their team members through various means. Leaders felt responsible for their team members throughout the pandemic, and this responsibility went

beyond merely overseeing task performance and involved assisting them through the challenging transition period. Support emerged through strategies such as daily check-ins, technical support, virtual gatherings, and offering flexibility. While these strategies provided regular communication touchpoints, they differ from the more targeted, intentional communication described in the next theme, which focused on conveying specific information to address employee concerns and uncertainties during the crisis.

### *Check-ins*

One of the ways participants supported their teams was through more frequent check-ins, which included meetings or touchpoints in group chats. The frequency of these check-ins varied—some were held daily, twice a day, or weekly. The primary purpose of these check-ins was to provide support by answering questions, reducing uncertainty, and clarifying tasks and deliverables. It was a way for leaders to demonstrate their commitment to their team, and to show they were present and have time for them. Additionally, they offered a platform to discuss whatever was needed at the moment. Because team members were not physically in the same place, these check-ins ensured leaders stayed connected with their teams and heard their concerns. This approach helped provide a space for members to process the day, aimed at reducing uncertainty for employees, and demonstrated support.

Leaders used frequent check-ins to provide employees with a space to reflect on their workdays. Central to Natalie's approach were the daily check-ins, designed to encourage continuous reflection on the challenges team members were facing. She would start a chat at the end of the workday with her team members where they would:

Each share something good that happened, identify an area of opportunity, and talk about what we were excited about for the next day. I would send funny memes, photos, or videos of silly songs to keep the team upbeat. For participants who I knew were

struggling or had reached out and shared their challenges, I would keep in touch, saying, 'hope you're having a great day.' 'I'm here if you need anything.'

These daily check-ins and frequent touchpoints kept the team stay supported by allowing them to reflect on the day they had and the day to come. Check-ins also provided the opportunity for team members to share their thoughts and experiences regularly. Through these consistent daily interactions, Natalie tried to provide support and create a more connected team.

Merriam, similarly, created a space where the team members could share what they went through each day and verbalize their challenges. As a communications manager she maintained regular check-ins with her team, a routine that was in place before the pandemic but gained new significance during it:

We had a regular check-in, a weekly meeting, which seems kind of obvious, but it was really helpful for us to process a lot of things. We had it before; it wasn't new from COVID times, but it was definitely useful. It allowed us to download what the week had been like and do that verbally out loud together, which was nice.

By holding these regular check-ins, Merriam wanted her team members to feel heard. This open dialogue helped with reinforcing support within the team. Simply sharing their daily experiences with one another created a supportive environment where team members felt supported and heard. Additionally, Merriam used these meetings as an opportunity to offer direct feedback. The existence of this open space naturally created an environment where feedback could be exchanged, not just from leader to team members, but among all members themselves:

We had a lot of days when our team would get together and say, 'OK, we need some feedback.' The transition to using our cameras more often made us realize how important it was to see people's facial expressions and get that feedback when we didn't have face-to-face time. It was a learning habit we had to develop after a while of remote working.

The incorporation of video calls into their check-ins helped them better understand each other. In Merriam's approach feedback was not just about performance but also about providing the support needed to function well in a remote work environment.

Check-ins were also helpful in reducing uncertainty within the team and leaders utilized them to provide employees with clear expectations. During times of crisis, when so much in the organization is changing, the expectations everyone was used to can become unclear. These check-ins were added to make sure everyone was on the same page, with leaders providing clear direction to each team member. Recognizing this need, Daniel implemented a system of morning and evening meetings to show support for his team. These daily meetings were not part of the pre-pandemic routine but became essential in the new working environment. Daniel explained:

We established something new that we didn't do before. Having daily meetings. Every day, we had one meeting in the morning and one at the end of the day to ensure we were on track and that everyone knew exactly what to do. Typically, we had these meetings with team members at 7:00 AM or 8:00 AM, depending on the different projects we had. The morning virtual meeting ensured everyone was on track and knew their tasks, with a to-do list and prioritization help from the project manager.

The morning meetings provided an opportunity for team members to receive clear directives and prioritize their tasks with the help of the project manager. Daniel wanted to ensure that everyone had a well-defined "to-do list" and knew exactly what was expected of them.

In addition to morning check-ins, Daniel also established evening meetings to review the day's progress. He noted, "At the end of the day we had another short meeting to go through what they did, what they need to complete next and then what they couldn't finish." These sessions supported team members by allowing them to reflect on their accomplishments and address any challenges they encountered. Through this dual-meeting structure Daniel demonstrated his dedication to supporting his team. He provided regular opportunities for

discussion and ensured that team members felt free to reach out to him. The consistent check-ins helped keep projects on track and also alleviated potential stress for team members, who might have otherwise felt anxious without this structured support.

The daily check-ins were introduced as a support mechanism for Eddie's team similar to Natalie, Merriam, and Daniel. He pointed out that for his particular area of work, the main change was the mode of communication, not the expectations of the job. Eddie stated, "despite people working from home...things still needed to be done, and we just needed to do them." He acknowledged that his team was composed of experienced individuals who did not require constant oversight to remain productive. Nonetheless, Eddie emphasized the importance of maintaining a regular check-in to clearly convey deliverables and expectations. He explained, "having more frequent cadence of touch points, and making sure that we were communicating what deliverables were, what expectations were helped to keep everyone aligned and informed." He supported his team and helped them navigate the uncertainties of remote work by ensuring that "clear deliverables and timelines were communicated" to everyone. The check-ins provided stability and clarity on expectations, which were a crucial support strategy during the pandemic.

In a similar context, Alex used department-wide check-ins to reduce uncertainty and maintain increased engagement among employees. Rather than conducting individual check-ins, these sessions were held at the department level to open a direct channel between leadership and teams. The purpose was to allow employees to ask questions about COVID policies, discuss the many changes within the organization, and share their concerns openly. The bi-weekly video sessions led by organizational leaders provided a structured platform for discussing topics directly relevant to employees, creating spaces for open dialogue and encouraging participation by addressing questions and concerns in real-time:

We did a bi-weekly talk show, for lack of a better term, where we would do interviews, cover current topics, and give reminders on things coming up that would be of interest or impact to our staff. At the beginning of the pandemic, we made the decision to increase the frequency of these opportunities to connect with leadership across the department from bi-weekly to weekly. We modified how we held the events; we didn't cancel any of them but adapted them for a virtual environment.

Attendance at many of these events actually increased according to Alex because more people were able to attend when they were virtual and recorded, allowing follow-up later. By addressing questions and uncertainties openly and regularly through various channels, including virtual events and digital communications, Alex showed support for his employees. This approach primarily reduced uncertainty but also encouraged participation, kept employees informed, and ultimately led to more engagement across the department.

Leaders showed they cared for and appreciated their team members through check-ins. Liz, in her own words, embodies a leadership style “grounded in the principles of servant leadership” focused on supporting and uplifting her team. Liz emphasized the importance of her weekly check-ins with the team and the important role they had in uplifting her team members and helping them succeed:

I approach leadership as a servant leader, focusing on how I can help my team succeed. I ask them, ‘What do you need from me so that you can shine?’ I value each team member intrinsically and for their role in our team. My goal is to uplift and spotlight their amazing talents. I meet weekly with interns, contract employees, and collaborators to ensure clarity in their roles and support for my students. My style involves a lot of cheerleading, positive reinforcement, and expressing gratitude for their contributions.

For her team, Liz acted as a cheerleader during the check-ins and offered continuous positive reinforcement and gratitude. This motivated her team members and created a supportive environment where they felt encouraged to “take initiative.”

Leaders can demonstrate their care for team members during a crisis by checking in on their well-being. Zachery highlighted the value of consistent check-ins with the purpose of asking how his team members were doing. He emphasized:

I think the regular connection, like one-on-ones once or twice a week, and having some sort of video touchpoint to chat with people about how they're doing beyond just the job, was really important. Just a simple 'how are you really doing.'

These check-ins were not solely about work-related tasks. While some sessions provided support for specific job responsibilities, many were dedicated to checking in on employees' overall well-being. The function of the check-ins was to create a compassionate work environment and make team members feel supported both professionally and personally.

The importance of personal check-ins is also evident in Sean's leadership practice. Sean's personal engagement with employees who were down with COVID-19 showed an individualized approach to support through check-ins. When team members got sick and had to stay home, his daily calls to check on their well-being were a display of care and support. These personalized check-ins were especially important as the COVID-19 virus was new and dangerous. By maintaining a personal connection, Sean provided support and comfort to his team members as they navigated the crisis:

I remember doing something that was sort of fun. When those people that got COVID couldn't come to work I would like to call them every day as they were home. You know, a couple times a day and be like, 'hey, how are you?' And that was fun because it showed them that I loved them. Hopefully, right? And that I was grateful for them. I think, you know, that was a good benefit, and we certainly don't do that today. It was unique that we had the opportunity to talk on a routine personal basis.

This practice, although not sustained in the long term, shows the unique and meaningful ways leaders can connect with their teams during uncertain circumstances. It highlights how leaders

can forge deep and meaningful connections with their teams by going beyond standard protocols and addressing the specific needs of individuals during crises.

Leaders utilized check-ins in different ways to support their teams during the pandemic. These check-ins varied in frequency and format, but served to reduce uncertainty, provide clarity, and maintain a sense of care for employees. Whether through daily meetings, personalized calls, or department-wide sessions, leaders demonstrated their commitment to their teams, ensuring that employees felt heard and supported during a challenging time.

### ***Technical Support***

Providing technical support was another way to offer support during the transition to remote work. For many team members, transitioning to virtual work during the pandemic was their first experience with fully remote work, relying solely on technology for their job. Before the pandemic, Alex's team for example, was coming in nearly five days a week. However, the pandemic "forced all teams to transition to a fully remote model almost overnight." For many leaders, including those in construction, education, and local government, where before the pandemic work was primarily done in person, the shift to online work because of COVID-19 was abrupt. While some teams quickly adapted to the new technologies, other leaders recognized the need to provide additional support to their teams in adapting to and utilizing new technology.

With the shift to remote work, technology became the central component of daily tasks, but leaders made efforts to support this aspect, understanding that technical challenges could lead to frustration and discouragement. One of the participants, Suzie, found the biggest challenge to be helping others adapt to this new technological landscape, which was causing demotivation. Unlike many others, Suzie did not work in a traditional institute, instead, her role involved supervising a group of teachers who taught English to members of an international

telecommunication company. The adaptation to using technology for work was perceived as a major responsibility, particularly since many team members were not part of the “computer generation.” Therefore, Suzie had to encourage teachers to embrace the online format. Many teachers struggled to adapt, and as a result, they did not invest time in motivating their students to participate. In her words:

I decided to help them understand the system better, so that was one of the initiatives. I personally did it without being paid for it, just out of kindness and, you know, to make everything in the process actually move forward.

The lack of encouragement from the teachers required Suzie to step in and take on the additional responsibility of boosting student engagement. If student attendance dropped, classes risked being canceled, which would negatively impact the business. To address this, Suzie made numerous calls to employees, including seniors and managers, to offer support to ensure they attended their classes. Despite these challenges, she found it rewarding to connect with her colleagues and help them navigate this new environment. She explained:

I voluntarily taught the team members who needed help and they would also constantly contact me. They’d text me letting me know their problems, even sometimes they in the middle of the class. Something would come up and they would contact me saying ‘why is this happening? Students cannot hear me’ or something like that. And I had to put the time, recognize what the problem is and help them, because if I told them “I don’t know how to fix this,’ ‘you have to figure it out yourself’ then what kind of a leader would I be? How would they look at me? How would they look up to me if I responded in that way? I had difficulties of my own. Uh, you know adapting and everything. But as a person responsible for keeping the team, keeping them motivated and everything, and keeping them actually ‘physically’ in the team so that they wouldn’t leave, I had to compromise this way as well.

To support the team, Suzie dedicated significant time to demystifying technology for her colleagues. Despite not being initially familiar with various platforms, she took it upon herself to learn and then voluntarily teach and assist her team. This included troubleshooting issues in real-

time, even during classes, to ensure a smooth experience for both teachers and students. She felt her proactive and supportive approach was crucial in maintaining team motivation and ensuring the continuity of classes.

Chad, similarly, took action to provide technical assistance to his team members as they experienced the complexities of online education. Chad noticed that many staff members were unfamiliar with online teaching and needed guidance. He emphasized the technical support he provided, explaining:

I took those non-tenure track faculty in particular who were particularly skilled at online education, and I put them into pods who were then going to help those people who did not have as much experience get their classes online.

Recognizing the necessity of expertise in online teaching for the success of his team, Chad established specialized support teams. Chad also facilitated practical resources to aid in the transition to online teaching. He mentioned, “I worked with some people to build videos. We would go into classrooms with lots of distancing and they would do videos that you could then put on your own home page to do some introduction to the materials.” These resources, created in collaboration with experts, were designed to help faculty effectively engage with their students in the new online format.

To summarize, leaders provided technical support during the sudden shift to remote work, recognizing the challenges faced by team members unfamiliar with online tools. By offering help and troubleshooting, they helped their teams adapt. This approach was also effective in maintaining team morale and showing that support during a crisis can involve addressing technical needs.

## *Virtual Gatherings*

A common strategy among leaders during the pandemic was the implementation of virtual gatherings to create a supportive environment despite social separation. These virtual gatherings took various forms, including virtual happy hours, lunch meetings, and game times. Leaders organized these events to recreate the sense connection lost due to the lack of physical interaction. Virtual happy hours provided a casual setting for team members to unwind and socialize, mimicking the informal chats that often occurred in the office. Lunch meetings allowed employees to share meals together. Game times introduced an element of playfulness, encouraging team bonding through shared activities. The virtual gatherings maintained team morale and helped employees feel connected in spite of being physically apart.

During the challenging times of the pandemic, virtual happy hours helped support the team members by boosting their morale. The lack of physical connection posed significant challenges for some leaders, making virtual gatherings essential for providing support. Eddie elaborated on this approach, emphasizing the importance of creating supportive environments that facilitate interaction among peers. In fact, he believed he had more interaction with his team than he normally would in the office because it was easy to reach out as needed or to touch base, given the uncertainty of the situation. He noted:

There's different things you can do to create environments for interaction with peers or people you need to interact with. There would even be things like virtual happy hours on Friday, where everyone's sitting at home, bringing their favorite beverage as a way to unwind after work. Because we weren't physically seeing colleagues in the office, there was more effort and emphasis on having regular meetings with peers, managers, and necessary contacts.

Eddie's implementation of virtual happy hours served multiple purposes. First, it provided an informal environment for team members to connect and socialize, which assisted with

maintaining morale during the pandemic. Secondly, it reinforced the sense of community that regular office interactions would typically support.

For Chad, who had been a department chair for over a decade, the daily chats in the hallways were a crucial way to make himself approachable to his staff pre-pandemic. He firmly believed, “it’s easier for me to come to [them] than for [them] to come to me.” When the pandemic imposed restrictions, he immediately sought an alternative way to maintain this support. He reflected on the challenge by stating:

You know, over the nine years I’ve been doing this job, I’ve had a lot of really important conversations because I was in the hallways... So how do I do that same thing? How do I provide that same thing without that “thing?” And the answer was I didn’t. I just couldn’t. What do I do? Just drop in on somebody’s zoom room? I mean, you just can’t. So, we did try to do things like online happy hours and I became more intentional to reach out to people and say, hey, let’s have a conversation.

These virtual gatherings helped bridge the gap left by the absence of spontaneous hallway conversations and were in place to make sure team members still felt supported and connected.

Because of the significant stress and fear experienced by many team members due to the pandemic, Morris also recognized the vital role played by virtual happy hours as a support system to boost morale. He believed the pandemic had a “profound impact on everyone,” with some team members experiencing the loss of colleagues and acquaintances to COVID-19. This context of shared hardship made the implementation of virtual happy hours an essential strategy for providing support. Morris explained:

You hear about people that you worked with or people you knew in [the organization] who actually got COVID and passed away. So that was just, you know, that was always the, the lingering thing in people’s brains was, God If I get this virus is it going to kill me? And I think it could! It was hard for people to get past that, you know, before the vaccines and all the more legitimate tests came out.

Morris echoed the effectiveness of virtual gatherings. His implementation of virtual happy hours was to keep his team “rallied and motivated and functional.” Recognizing the challenges posed by the lack of in-person interaction, Morris and his management team implemented virtual happy hours and engaging activities to maintain team cohesion and morale. He explained:

We were playing games and trying to have funny things. We were doing virtual happy hours after hours to be able to get people together on a virtual platform and just commiserate and, you know, to keep bonding as a group because we couldn't do it in person... I think those little things went a long way. I think everybody on the planet was doing virtual happy hours to be honest with you and thank God they didn't ban the liquor sales... because I think obviously that was a big outlet for people.

The acknowledgment of the broader context and the shared experiences of his team shows Morris's empathy as a leader and the reason he implemented this support system within his team. In his team, this initiative provided a platform for team members to socialize but also helped alleviate the stress and isolation brought about by the pandemic.

Moreover, virtual gatherings helped in supporting employees by creating moments of fun and maintaining a connection between members. Daniel emphasized the importance of bringing moments of fun and connection to remote work environments as a way of supporting the team. He recounted:

We usually, before COVID, during lunchtime would gather around a big table, and everyone would tell a personal story or a memory or what they did during the weekend. You know, we would have a getaway from work and had fun moments and made everybody laugh and, you know, we had a good environment.

To adapt this tradition to the virtual setting, Daniel organized weekly meetings where team members could share anecdotes and experiences, aiming to recreate the sense of closeness that characterized their in-person gatherings. Daniel also introduced lunch meetings for certain projects within the team, providing additional opportunities for social interaction and support.

These gatherings allowed team members to connect not only professionally but also personally, as they shared stories and experiences with their families during COVID:

I remember how virtual fun meetings helped everyone stay motivated despite the fear and stress of the working environment. These social meetings let us chat with each other, have fun, and provide support. In some projects, we even had virtual lunch meetings, where we ate lunch together with our families. During these meetings, we shared funny stories and sometimes even sad or scary ones. However, we tried to encourage everyone to stay optimistic and focus on sharing positive and funny stories.

Daniel underscored the importance of maintaining optimism and humor, even during the challenging time of the pandemic. He aimed to cultivate a supportive environment by emphasizing positivity and facilitating moments of connection amid the demands of their professional responsibilities.

A simple group game can establish a support system during a crisis like COVID-19, where people lost all physical interaction with their team members. Zachery shared his experience, highlighting how online games like Quiplash provided a fun and engaging way for team members to connect: He mentioned:

We would play occasionally an online game... It was Quiplash or whatever it was. It was a video series where you get on and everybody's playing some games and having some fun. We tried to do some online party type things to keep people engaged. Especially for somebody like me who is, like I've said, supremely extroverted, it was fun to just find some interaction with people, but I don't know that everybody enjoyed it. Some people enjoyed just being at home alone.

His approach was to keep the connection between members, especially for those who thrived on social interaction. For Zachery, an extrovert, these virtual interactions offered a much-needed connection and a break from the isolation of remote work. He acknowledged that while some team members preferred being alone, these virtual gatherings were essential for keeping the more extroverted members engaged and connected.

Virtual gatherings took many forms, including virtual happy hours, lunchtime meetups, and online games. Leaders in the study consistently reported receiving positive feedback about these initiatives, highlighting their effectiveness in bringing people together even for short periods. These interactions were crucial for boosting morale, as they provided a sense of connection and community during a time of physical separation. Whether through a casual chat over lunch or a competitive game of Quiplash, these virtual activities played a vital role in maintaining team spirit and supporting employees. Leaders created spaces where team members could come together, share experiences, and find moments of joy and connection, which they felt created a positive and cohesive team culture during the various challenges the pandemic brought about.

### ***Offering Flexibility***

Leaders supported employees by offering flexibility and adjusting to different circumstances and requirements. Although the remote work setting naturally brought a certain level of flexibility, some leaders took it a step further by offering even more adaptable options for their teams and adjusting their own approaches to be more accommodating.

Offering flexibility helped reduce anxiety in situations where employees face numerous changes and complexities, in both their personal lives and work, due to a global pandemic. Daniel tried to offer his team flexibility within his power. He acknowledged the anxiety his team had, noting that the pandemic was a tough time, and everyone was worried and terrified. In response, Daniel made an effort to be more understanding and flexible, rather than adopting a strict, task-oriented approach. He emphasized, “I was trying to be understanding as much as I could and not be like a tough boss to just be like, ‘I need this information,’ or ‘I need this work done.’” He held private meetings with his employees to understand their experiences, enabling

him to offer support in a flexible and tailored manner that worked best for each individual. He explained that really mattered to him was to:

Make sure I know their concerns and I know their challenges and I'm aware of and their problems and I'd always ask them if anything is affecting your work and if it's affecting your productivity or if there are any concerns with anything make sure you're explaining and telling me that. And I understand and it's COVID and it's a lot of problems, a lot of pressure.

The communications he had during these meetings allowed him to address individual issues directly and offer support tailored to each person's needs.

Providing flexibility by allowing more autonomy in one's work was a reassuring way to offer support. Liz reinforced this approach by prioritizing flexibility in her communications with her team members. Before the pandemic she would show this by specifically saying things like, "I trust you. Do your work when it works for you. Just check in with me every week." But during the pandemic she offered even more flexibility and would tell her team that if they want to come into the office and work with her that is fine. This approach allowed them to work at their own pace and offered them extra flexibility in the pandemic. She did this because she realized first the importance of flexibility. Liz's commitment to flexibility extended to her willingness to let her team make decisions independently. She encouraged her team members to take ownership of their projects, providing them with the responsibility and space needed to make critical decisions. Despite her willingness to delegate, Liz maintained strong relationships and rapport with her team, which she believed were key to their stable and effective operations. "For the most part, I've just built good relationships and rapport with them, so it's more of an open working relationship than a managerial one," she explained.

Providing flexibility led to employees achieving a better work-life balance, which was especially important during the COVID-19 pandemic. Alex tried to offer flexibility to his team

“within reason,” by revisiting their remote work policy. In his words this change in the policy “was highly effective, and we received a lot of positive response from it.” He added:

Everyone really values flexibility to a certain extent. So within the bounds of our policies, we tried to embrace that. We were already doing remote work. I forget how many months into the pandemic, but we revisited our remote work policies. Previously, our requirement was that people had to live close to our offices because of the in-office requirement. Now, with remote work not just from home, we didn’t have that need for them to come into the office. So we introduced things like allowing employees to work out of state for a certain number of days per year. This offered more flexibility and work-life balance, allowing them to spend time with family in another state without using their vacation or sick time.

Prioritizing flexibility and understanding the diverse needs of the team, Alex cultivated a more supportive and adaptable work environment.

Natalie, similar to Liz, Daniel, and Alex stressed the need for flexibility in remote work settings. She explained that clarity in directions and expectations is crucial because, without the ability to walk by someone’s desk in person, it becomes necessary to plan things out more effectively and communicate more clearly. Natalie said, “you don’t have the opportunity of walking by their desk because they’re all working from home. If you need something in 5 minutes or an hour...you need to plan a little bit more.” By specifying deadlines and being explicit about her expectations, Natalie ensured that her team members were aware of what was required and could manage their time effectively. She recognized that remote work environments necessitated more structured communication and adapted by providing greater flexibility in task delivery times. Understanding the unique challenges posed by the pandemic, she allowed her team more time to complete tasks and was more accommodating of their circumstances. The pandemic taught her to be even more flexible and open-minded, and she noted that it “really opened my mind to better ways or different ways” of managing her team.

In summary, the theme of support showcases the ways leaders, throughout the pandemic, went beyond their usual responsibilities to provide meaningful assistance to their teams. They offered technical support to ease the transition to remote work, reduced uncertainty through regular check-ins, boosted morale via virtual gatherings, and prioritized flexibility to accommodate the varying needs of their employees. By adapting their communication, offering autonomy, revisiting remote work policies, and being more accommodating to individual needs, they fostered a supportive work environment that helped their teams navigate the challenges of remote work and uncertainty effectively.

### **Safety**

Leaders across various sectors prioritized safety to protect their employees during the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, when asked what their primary concerns were as a leader during COVID many responded, safety. Leaders were concerned about both the physical and mental health of their employees. This focus on safety reflects intentional communication, as it involved clearly communicating safety measures and health resources, but it stands apart due to its specific emphasis on employee well-being rather than addressing broader or crisis-related uncertainties.

### ***Physical Safety***

The physical safety of employees was of utmost importance to some leaders, who strived to create an environment where their team members would not feel threatened in terms of their physical well-being. During the pandemic, this physical well-being primarily referred to any potential infection with the COVID-19 virus, which could endanger not just the individual but also their families, friends, and coworkers. The physical safety was a concern of those leaders whose team included “essential workers.” An essential worker is someone who is required to

keep working during a business shutdown to ensure that essential operations continue running smoothly (Coulson, 2024). In this study, the leaders with essential workers were involved in infrastructure construction, and production teams in a local government responsible for broadcasting news.

Leaders concerned about the physical safety of their team members put practices in place to make sure they work in a risk-free environment. Daniel's team was classified as essential workers, meaning their operations could not stop and all team members had to continue their duties as usual. While the field crew worked in the open air, where safety concerns were relatively lower, the primary concern was for those working in the enclosed spaces of the construction site trailers. Daniel tried to have "as few people as possible on the job site, especially in the trailers." Salaried employees, such as project managers, assistant project managers, and superintendents, typically worked in the trailers. Having all of them on site would compromise safety, while having everyone work from home risked slowing down or disrupting operations. Daniel's goal was to minimize the number of people in the trailers to ensure both safety and operational efficiency; He aimed to have "at most one person in each room to ensure social distancing and avoid contact." For safety reasons, Daniel implemented a rotational system where his team members would come to the office on different days. Although maintaining a hybrid setup was challenging for a construction team, Daniel's primary focus was to ensure the safety of his team and their families. He said:

Safety is very important to us in the construction industry. In our company, one of our biggest objectives and missions every year is to be safer than the year before. We always say safety over productivity, and we care about safety a lot.

This was a strong motivation for them throughout the pandemic. By this method of working, which was not ideal for the operation, they knew they were keeping themselves and their families safe.

When leading a team of essential workers during a global pandemic, ensuring safety becomes paramount. Morris's team was also deemed as essential workers. In a local government marketing and communications team where press conferences needed to be held, recorded, and streamed many people's presence in Morris' team was needed. One thing standing in their way was they did not have the technology like some of the news stations that allowed them to set up remote production facilities for their news anchors; "we just didn't have that capability." Therefore, handling this situation was not a simple task. Morris recounts, "The staff was uneasy, and some people were very apprehensive about coming in, fearing they would get sick. They were worried about their health, understandably so. It was a challenge because people were scared and uncertain." Morris' team was in charge of city messaging about COVID-19, and he had to:

put enough best practices in place to help people navigate the situation. If someone was immunocompromised or had other concerns, they were allowed to work from home and contribute remotely. I think the marketing team could do most of their work from home, which, thankfully, they still can. Everyone figured out how to navigate that situation. But we had to put measures in place here. We had to try to keep people home who could be home, and bring in the essential folks for press conferences and to create a plethora of messaging on everything the city was dealing with.

However, things were not always as easy as sending people who had concerns home. On days when they had to do up to 30 press conferences, people would call in sick and not show up. Testing was not an option at that time either because they "were just becoming available and were hard to get. So, if someone had symptoms, we just told them to stay home." This necessitated the implementation of new measures to ensure safety and maintain workflow.

Morris found ways to make the work environment safe according to COVID guidelines, such as installing plastic dividers for social distancing:

We had to figure out ways to make our rooms safe according to the COVID guidelines. We installed plastic dividers so people could socially distance, and we needed three or four people in one room to put on a live press conference. People in the room always had to wear a mask and gloves. It was an interesting time, but we had to have people in the building. All in all, I think we counted around 75 press conferences that went out on our channel and other platforms to inform the public about what was going on in the city and how to protect themselves. Those were all COVID updates over the course of a year and a half. It was a lot.

Despite the numerous challenges, Morris's leadership and the team's adaptability ensured that they could continue to provide essential communication services to the public.

Benjamin shared concerns about his team's safety, particularly as a leader in the construction sector. In this industry, he and his team were essential workers who could not function remotely, making safety a critical and constant concern. He was deeply concerned about their team's safety and took extensive measures to ensure a safe working environment during the pandemic. Benjamin shows this commitment:

We provided face coverings for everyone and did a lot of trials to see which masks they liked and what kind of fabric they preferred, really trying to listen to their input. We made some changes with their safety glasses because when you're wearing a mask with safety glasses, they fog up. So, we started buying higher-grade safety glasses to keep them comfortable. Seeing the team members realize that we were trying to do everything we could to protect them and make them comfortable helped increase morale.

Benjamin felt that higher safety within his team led to higher team morale, achieving two crucial objectives simultaneously. This experience shows the importance placed on safety in the construction industry, a concern that is always present but becomes even more critical when considering the risks of a global pandemic.

Sean, another leader in the construction industry, was deeply concerned about the safety of his team during the pandemic. His approach – like Benjamin, Morris, and Daniel – highlights the complexities of maintaining operations while prioritizing health and safety. Choosing to prioritize both at the same time is challenging. To Sean “there wasn’t a right decision. There were lots of things and lots of guidelines, but I was trying to make the right decision for the employees.” His team was required to continue work and finish the job by a certain deadline and missing the deadline by a day meant they had to pay a penalty fee. This made the pressure even higher for Sean. In his words:

I was wearing all these hats. I’m the leader on this job, right? And I have to provide a safe work environment, but I also have to finish the work. We’re not stopping. We weren’t required to stop, so we had to finish the work. So those were the challenges: keeping everybody safe, running the project, making sure that I’m following the guidelines all at the same time.

He, similar to Daniel, implemented a rotation in-person work system to ensure safety. However, not everyone had the option of working remotely; some people still needed to come in. On the project sites, where physical work was essential, operations continued under new regulations that the company deemed necessary to provide the safest working environment possible, given the heightened fear of spreading the disease:

We implemented new cleaning strategies and enforced the separation of employees. It wasn’t just about following safety protocols; it was also about demonstrating to our team that their safety was a priority, giving them the reassurance they needed to feel comfortable coming to work. This was a significant challenge, but I believe most people were just grateful to have a job and to be able to work in a safer environment.

The key challenges he faced included, first and foremost, ensuring a safe work environment. By visibly prioritizing safety through these actions, he was able to build trust with his team, which was essential for their willingness to continue working during such a stressful period.

The experiences of these leaders show that achieving safety, though critically important, is not easy when managing essential workers. Essential workers, by definition, must continue their duties despite risks, making the implementation of safety measures more complex and demanding. Balancing the need to keep operations running with the imperative to protect employees' health requires innovative solutions. The necessity of being physically present at work, as opposed to working remotely, amplifies the challenges, making it clear that effective leadership during a crisis involves tough decision-making and a focus on both safety and productivity.

### ***Mental Safety***

In addition to physical safety, mental safety emerged as a critical concern for leaders during the pandemic. The unprecedented stress and uncertainty brought about by COVID-19 significantly impacted the mental well-being of employees. Ensuring mental safety involved offering resources to help employees manage stress and anxiety and providing open communication when it came to mental health talks.

Leaders recognized the uncertainty their employees were experiencing and found that reminding them of the available institutional services was essential. Daniel highlighted the importance of mental health support and acknowledged that he and his team members all felt a lot of pressure and had feelings of extreme uncertainty due to the pandemic:

Mental health issues were significant. Our company also provided mental health services after a few months, which was super helpful. Our HR department included it in our insurance, allowing us to call a doctor or therapist and talk about the situation. I would remind my team about these services regularly. It was incredibly helpful.

This shows that Daniel valued his team's mental safety as much as their physical safety. He consistently reminded his team to utilize the available resources for their well-being. By doing so, he encouraged his employees to take advantage of the services provided to them.

Alex, in a similar manner, was aware of the importance of his team's mental safety. He considered himself fortunate that "none of [his] team members suffered from extreme depression or isolation due to the pandemic, but [he] was aware that it could happen." Alex elaborated on his approach:

So, I was very proactive in reminding them about our employee benefits, which are offered to us free of charge. Whether it was job counseling or other resources, I gently reminded them of what was available. I felt a strong responsibility to keep my team members healthy, both mentally and physically, during the pandemic. I wanted to be there for my team.

Alex felt responsible as a leader for both the mental and physical health of his employees. He did what he could within his power by reminding his team of the free employee benefits available, such as counseling, to ensure they had access to the necessary support during the pandemic.

Reminding employees about available resources was also a strategy employed by Morris:

There were times when we had to really help raise people up and get them to engage because they were struggling. The city provided a lot of mental health services and people to talk to, which I thought was a good idea, and they still do, which is nice.

Morris encouraged his team members to utilize the services provided by the city, which he saw as a valuable tool to help employees manage their struggles. Moreover, these examples show that leaders like Daniel, Alex, and Morris were committed to the mental well-being of their teams. They recognized the significant impact of the pandemic on their employees' mental health and took proactive steps to ensure support was available.

The pandemic brought mental health conversations to the forefront, making leaders engaging in them more frequently. It is interesting to note that all the three leaders mentioned above were leading teams with a mix of essential and non-essential workers. And for a team consisting of non-essential workers who all worked remotely, "it was hard to stay attuned to where people were emotionally, mentally, and even physically. Sometimes people would get

sick, and we would barely know it because we just weren't around each other." Liz believed that the isolating nature of remote work and its abrupt implementation caused many people, including her team, to experience feelings of "mass depression and widespread mental health struggles."

I would say the mental health aspect was significant. I don't think anyone was doing particularly well; it felt like a mass depression and a widespread mental health struggle. Everyone was struggling across the board, and because we were so isolated, it was hard to know how much or how to help. We were all so separate that when we came back together, it became clear who was struggling and needed help. In person, you can read body language, energy, and see how people are doing. But when isolated and remote, it was difficult to understand that.

Before the pandemic, Liz believed that discussions about mental health at work were not common for employees to have. However, the pandemic changed that, as she had her team members talk to her more about their mental health struggles. She noted that this openness was particularly significant given that most of her team members belonged to a younger generation, who are more willing to discuss and prioritize mental health issues. The pandemic heightened awareness of the importance of mental health struggles at work and encouraged people to be more open about sharing their experiences. As Liz shared:

My team, before the pandemic, were less open about their mental health struggles. Now, I regularly have them share their challenges with energy, time management, and mental health reasons. What's changed is the increased openness to acknowledge that mental health is as critically integral as physical health to our ability to be productive. This level of integration of mental health into the workplace wasn't as prevalent before the pandemic. I also think there's a generational divide. Older people with many years of work experience before the pandemic still struggle to acknowledge their mental health needs, feeling that it's not acceptable to admit they need to slow down due to mental struggles. In contrast, the younger generation is more open about these issues and will continue to bring this awareness with them. It's a mixed bag.

The shift towards prioritizing mental health in the workplace is a significant and positive outcome of the pandemic. Leaders like Liz have become more aware of the needs of their employees, leading to the creation of an environment where open discussions about mental

health are encouraged. This change primarily supports the well-being of employees and can also enhance productivity and job satisfaction.

Natalie also placed significant emphasis on mental health and wellness. By integrating brain breaks, exercises, and breathing prompts into the team's schedule, she aimed for a holistic approach to well-being. She shared that:

I am on the Health and Wellness Committee. I'm also just a super nerd in health and Wellness. On this side, I have my nutrition certification and all the things, so I just always really made sure at least weekly that we did that as a group, and I encouraged them to do it daily. I encouraged them to get out and go for a walk. In fact, I prompted and encouraged. After 50 minutes of work, go take 10 minutes to walk around the block. And then I actually created kind of a checklist for our managers of best tips and practices on building resiliency and addressing mental health and burnout type stuff. And then I made it mandatory.

Through these initiatives, Natalie tried to promote continuous reflection and provided practical tools for managing stress. She regularly encouraged her team to engage in activities that supported their mental health, such as taking walks, practicing mindfulness, and participating in group wellness exercises. According to her, the feedback from her team was overwhelmingly positive, indicating that these strategies were effective in alleviating pressure and enhancing overall well-being.

As workplaces continue to evolve, maintaining this focus on mental health will be crucial in building resilient and supportive teams. The experiences of these leaders highlight the importance of mental health awareness and the need for ongoing efforts to integrate mental health support into workplace culture. These actions can help mitigate the ongoing challenges employees face during a crisis like the pandemic, and they can also strengthen the foundation for a healthier work environment.

In summary, throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, leaders took deliberate steps to prioritize both the physical and mental safety of their teams. For essential workers, this involved implementing strict safety protocols, reducing onsite presence, and finding innovative ways to maintain operations without compromising health. Mental safety was also a key focus, with leaders actively promoting available resources and encouraging open communication to help employees manage the increased stress and uncertainty.

### **Leadership and Team Relationships**

Leaders in the study were asked to discuss their relationships with both challenging and good team members before and during the pandemic, including whether the pandemic influenced their management approaches. All leaders reported that they managed the challenging team member differently than the good team member. Furthermore, they all indicated that the pandemic did not alter their interpersonal relationships with these team members nor affect their management strategies for either one. This theme highlights how leaders maintained distinct approaches based on the nature of the relationship with each team member, irrespective of the group dynamics.

Before diving into the sub-themes, it is important to differentiate a few of the ways leaders defined a “good” team member and a “challenging” team member. According to Eddie, his interactions with a good team member is characterized by “their overcommunication, teamwork, and willingness to help out. They are someone you can bounce ideas off of. During the pandemic, and even before and after, these qualities remained consistent.” For Zachery it is someone who “no matter how big the problem was, they are always willing to help.” Morris described them as “people who were thriving and doing a really good job needed less direction,

less coaching, and less explanation. They were able to move forward and take the initiative.”

When Daniel thinks of a good team member, he thinks of someone who:

Always provided good reports and information on time. I didn't have to go through everything to ensure it was fine; everything was ready with proper dates. He communicated any problems or issues with me properly, so I was aware if something was off. This person was always good, even before COVID.

Merriam sees a good member as someone who is “super independent. Once she gets the green light on something, she becomes creative and comes up with new ideas.” Liz approaches a good team member with a lot of trust. She had “faith that they would meet deadlines and provide what was needed.”

On the other hand, a challenging team member had many of the opposite features. Eddie's description is someone who “requires creative ways to engage them and almost force them to participate and provide what was needed.” Daniel had to constantly ensure the challenging member was aware of their tasks and the same “was true before COVID.” A distracted and unmotivated team member is what Morris described as challenging. The interviews revealed that leaders approached managing good and challenging team members differently, primarily based on their level of trust in each individual. Leaders spent varying amounts of time and energy on team members, with more effort required for those they found less reliable. For challenging team members, leaders often had to engage in open communication about expectations and explore ways to provide support and improve performance.

### ***Trust***

None of the participants used the same approach when managing a good team member versus a challenging one. Trust is an important component when it comes to leading people and one of the differentiating factors between a good and a challenging member. The level of trust leaders have in a team member significantly affects the way they lead them.

The level of trust between a leader and a team member can significantly ease or complicate the leadership dynamic. Sarah's relationship with the good team member was characterized by trust and mutual understanding:

I didn't have many problems leading this person because they were quite understanding. They knew me well and understood why I demanded certain things. They were flexible and adapted to the situation. I would sometimes seek their advice because they were 12 years older and had a lot of wisdom. Even though I was the supervisor, I valued their input and found their guidance helpful. It was much less challenging to work with this person.

Leading the good team member was "easy." They were reliable and understanding. What made it particularly easy for Sarah was the "mutual respect and understanding. It was a win-win situation, and everyone was happy because we accepted and faced challenges together." This made her feel like she had a true member in navigating the complexities of their work environment.

On the other hand, the challenging team member in Sarah's team had reliability issues even before the pandemic. This person had frequent complaints from students about not being punctual, finishing classes early, and canceling classes on short notice. These behaviors disrupted the class timeline schedule and created challenges for the team:

For the difficult team member, I had to be more serious and assertive. They didn't respond well to normal requests and needed to understand the severity of the situation. It was harder to make them listen and follow through. During the pandemic, this person continued to have excuses like internet problems, and it became hard to trust their reasons. When you lose trust, it's difficult to work effectively in a team. Their lack of punctuality and reliability influenced other team members negatively. Eventually, we had to let her go, even though she was good at her job. Because being a good team member is also very important.

The contrast between managing a good team member and a challenging one highlights the importance of trust in leadership. Even when a team member is skilled at their job, a lack of

trust, stemming from issues like unreliability and frequent excuses, can undermine their effectiveness and negatively impact the entire team. In this case, Sarah had to be more serious and assertive with the challenging team member, but the lack of trust ultimately made it difficult to maintain a productive working relationship, leading to the decision to let her go.

Similar to other leaders, Liz's approach to managing the challenging team member was significantly different from her approach with a good team member, largely because she lacked trust in the challenging one. She had faith in the good member to meet deadlines and provide what was needed, noting that if she did not hear back from them, a simple follow-up-email a couple of days later would suffice. Her approach with the challenging member differed significantly:

In contrast, with the person I didn't have a positive working relationship with, there was a lot of distrust. I had very little faith that they would meet deadlines or provide what was required. My approach included sending an email, followed by a text message saying I sent an email, and another text message asking if they saw my previous messages. Finally, I would send a message saying if they didn't respond, I would make decisions myself.

This method of constant follow-ups and repeated messages was intended to ensure that work was completed on time. However, it often led to frustration and inefficiency. The lack of trust and poor communication made it challenging to maintain a cohesive work environment.

The way leaders manage team members is heavily influenced by the level of trust they have in them. Trust enables a smoother, more collaborative working relationship, as seen in Sarah's experience with her reliable team member, where mutual respect and understanding led to a productive partnership. In short, a lack of trust can complicate management, as it might lead to more assertive and frequent follow-ups with their challenging team members.

### *Time, Effort, Energy*

The difference in how leaders approached managing the two different types of team members often lay in the amount of time, effort, and energy they devoted to each individual. When leaders could rely on a good team member, there was no need for excessive check-ins or follow-ups. However, when a team member was less reliable, leaders had to invest extra time and effort to ensure that things were on track. This involved more frequent check-ins, asking about progress, and following up on when tasks would be completed, all to ensure that work was being done smoothly and effectively.

The time, effort, and energy leaders invest in managing team members varied greatly depending on the individual's needs and challenges. As Natalie explained, managing a reliable team member was like mentoring a "sponge," someone who readily absorbed guidance and required less oversight. She described this approach as, "almost like a sibling or someone that I saw great potential in and would just coach and explain what I would do." However, with a more challenging team member, Natalie found herself needing to invest significantly more time and energy due to the complexities involved, particularly when there was a power struggle. She shared:

I think that the more challenging person felt like they knew the right way and they knew better. And I wouldn't say that they necessarily were wrong about the way they wanted to do things, but... I was just really trying to help them understand their lack of self-awareness.

Managing the challenging team members required Natalie to dedicate extra time and effort to navigate power dynamics and foster self-awareness, ensuring the individual's actions align with team goals. As she further noted, "I always ask for permission to provide feedback and critique to the more challenging one... to encourage some of the self-development in that self-awareness area." This means the adjustment Natalie made in her approach eventually resulted in giving the

challenging team member more flexibility and ownership of their work while also subtly guiding them towards self-awareness and personal development.

Managing the good versus the challenging team member highlights the need for more hands-on oversight with those who require extra support to ensure task completion and accuracy. According to Daniel, the main difference between a good team member and a challenging one was that “the good member required minimal supervision and maintained accuracy, while the challenging member needed constant oversight and guidance to ensure proper task completion.” The good member always provided reports and logs on time and they always “communicated their issues” with him. Both the good team member and the challenging one showed the same behaviors before the pandemic. Daniel’s met with the good team member weekly, and he knew they would always provide accurate reports to him:

I would meet with him weekly. He knew he had to report to me and provide accurate data bi-weekly. We had different logs to update, and everything was always accurate. During COVID, there were times when reports were delayed or not accurate, but he communicated those issues with me. I understood and tried to be supportive, knowing he was dealing with problems.

In contrast with the challenging team member Daniel had to:

constantly ensure he was aware of his tasks. I had to micromanage him daily to ensure he was doing his job, updating logs, and providing accurate reports. Often, I had to double-check his work because sometimes the information he provided was not accurate. Even Before COVID, I had to remind him to update logs and provide reports. During COVID, it became much harder. Micromanaging him was challenging because he would sometimes get offended and didn’t communicate well with me. I didn’t want to put too much pressure and stress on him, but sometimes I had to. I tried to find a middle ground where I could apply pressure and ensure accuracy without making him feel bad. I made sure to ask for his concerns and encourage open communication. Balancing micromanagement while maintaining a good relationship was difficult.

For the good team member, Daniel’s minimal intervention demonstrated trust and mutual understanding. The mutual understanding also allowed the team member to be open even when

going through a difficult phase at work, knowing they had the support and freedom to manage their responsibilities effectively. The challenging team member required a more hands-on approach, which strained the leader-employee relationship. Daniel's need to micromanage was not a choice but a necessity to ensure task completion and accuracy. Daniel was committed to maintaining open communication and understanding both team members' concerns, but the outcomes were not the same.

Understanding the underlying motivations and personal challenges of less reliable team members often demands significant time and effort from leaders. The time spent with the difficult team member, for Benjamin, was dedicated to "understanding what motivated them and why they couldn't get their job done." He tried to see what was going on in their personal life or their past experiences to help them succeed. In contrast, the good team member was "steady, reliable, and just got things done." Therefore, he:

Focused less on the good team members because they were dependable, and I could count on them. For the ones who weren't as good, I spent a lot more time trying to help them get to where they needed to be.

While reliable team members require less direct supervision, those who struggle need more personalized attention to address their challenges and improve their performance. Paying individualized attention can be helpful in ensuring that all team members, regardless of their initial performance levels, are given the opportunity to succeed in the new work settings.

Merriam noted that the biggest difference in leading the two different members "was the significant amount of time and energy required to help the challenging team member reach the necessary performance level." For the independent one all she had to do was to give a green light and validation every now and then and they would deliver. The challenging one requires "more of that validation and reassurance" and required "a bit more hands-on approach."

Leading good team members requires less time and energy because, as many leaders put it, it is simply “easy.” “The less challenging or good team members are easier to lead,” said Eddie. A good team member in his team is someone who communicates well, is great at teamwork and is willing to help others in the team. They are people who have “leader-like” qualities; “During uncertain times, leaders’ qualities tend to shine more as they check in, ensure everything is good with you, and offer help. They continue to touch base regularly.” Eddie’s strategy with good team members is characterized by:

A more hands-off approach as they naturally do what they are supposed to do. Even though we tried to create more interaction, these team members were already meeting expectations. At my level, everyone is an adult, and everyone needs to do their job. I’m not there to babysit anyone. A good team member understands this and performs their duties regardless of the current environment.

The more challenging employees on the other hand, required “creative ways to engage them and almost force them to participate and provide what was needed.” Eddie often found that with challenging team members, he needed to employ different tactics to ensure their engagement. It required exploring various avenues to promote and facilitate interaction. This distinction in approach shows the varying levels of oversight required to manage different types of team members.

In managing team members, leaders found that the time, effort, and energy required varied significantly based on the individual’s reliability and performance. Reliable team members needed minimal oversight, allowing leaders to adopt a more hands-off approach, because of trust and mutual understanding. In contrast, challenging team members required more frequent check-ins, guidance, and personalized attention, which could strain the leader-member relationship.

## *Starting a Dialogue*

When leaders notice someone becoming more challenging to manage, they may decide to have an open dialogue, offering support and collaboratively exploring strategies to help the team member perform better, or initiating a conversation where leaders address performance issues, discuss ways to improve, and outline potential consequences if improvements aren't made. Managing a challenging team member can involve starting a dialogue for leaders to talk and find ways to help them, have difficult conversations.

Managing challenging team members involves initiating open dialogues with the purpose of exploring ways to support and guide them. Chad's approach to work is rooted in a strong sense of commitment and his approach to leadership is rooted in empathy. He describes himself as "kind and thoughtful," and believes strongly in honoring commitments: "if we've agreed to do certain things, we should go ahead and do them." He finds it challenging to move away from the assumption that people should follow through on their agreements in the way they were initially planned. Instead of just telling the challenging member "You simply have to do this," he tries to be more compelling and open up a dialogue:

I always try to use some sort of persuasive tactic like, 'Don't you think it would be better if you did this?' However, this wasn't always effective. When I saw my approach was not working, I would ask, 'Hey, why isn't this happening the way we talked about?' But more often, I would ask, 'What can I do to help you? What support would be helpful for you to get to where we agree you need to be?' I tend to shy away from asking 'why' directly, as it might bring up personal or medical reasons that are not appropriate for me to pry into. If someone wants to share, I'm happy to listen and provide support, but I feel it's not my job to pry. Instead, I focus on asking how I can help them find resources to do the job.

Despite his efforts to be supportive and understanding, there are times when the requests made are beyond his capacity to fulfill, such as reducing someone's workload significantly. In these cases, Chad remains committed to helping as much as he can within his own constraints, because

he also has his “own job to do.” He would proceed by asking how he can help and provide resources that might assist them.

Starting a dialogue with challenging team members is crucial for understanding their motivations and addressing performance issues. Morris faced more challenging situations with employees who were “distracted, dealing with issues at home, or simply not motivated.” These instances required difficult conversations. He recounted:

I had to be very blunt and say, ‘hey, I know you’re working from home, but when you’re working from home, the key word is working.’ if you’re going to work from home, you have to be working. Otherwise, it’s going to become a performance issue and involve HR, which nobody wants.

He noted that the media joked about people being on golf courses and ski resorts when they were supposed to be working and “had a computer in their face,” but the issue was real; some employees were logged in but not actually working, responding to messages hours later. To address this, Morris and his team had to have difficult discussions. He saw this as providing feedback to his team and he firmly believed if people don not take the feedback, “course correct,” and perform they will be “managed out.” He said this is just how the world works, and it is not just unique to their organization.

Benjamin, similarly, emphasized the importance of these conversations, stating,

It would kind of touch on what motivates them, and asked... ‘How can we get you motivated to get the things that we need done?’ Or maybe ‘is there something else that you like to try to do?’ You know, we try to set some standards, we try to talk about what motivates them, and if we can’t find that niche, then they’re gone.

He explained that this dialogue often involved exploring whether the team member might perform better in a different role or setting, and carefully recording their successes and failures. If the team member continued to struggle despite these efforts, Benjamin noted that they would ultimately be let go. This shows the necessity of clear, honest communication when dealing with

underperforming team members. By initiating these dialogues, leaders create an opportunity for both parties to openly discuss challenges, explore potential solutions, and set clear expectations moving forward. It allows team members to express their concerns or difficulties and for leaders to provide targeted support or reassignments as needed. Ultimately, this process ensures that all avenues for improvement are explored before any final decisions, such as termination, are made.

Initiating conversations with challenging team members is vital for leaders to identify the causes of performance problems and find ways to offer support. Leaders such as Chad, Morris, and Benjamin highlight the need for these discussions to offer feedback, clarify expectations, and work together on solutions. By having these conversations, leaders can address concerns early on and potentially avoid the need for more drastic measures down the line.

To summarize, managing team members during the pandemic showed the importance of trust, the allocation of time and effort, and the need for open dialogue. Leaders reported that their approach varied significantly between good and challenging team members and was greatly influenced by the level of trust they had in each individual. Reliable team members required minimal oversight, while challenging members demanded more frequent check-ins and guidance. Initiating conversations with challenging team members was crucial for understanding their motivations and addressing performance issues, which helped leaders to support their team members more effectively.

## **Summary**

The findings of the study reveal four themes: support, intentional communication, safety, and team relationships that exemplified how leaders adapted their leadership during the pandemic. Leaders showed a heightened sense of responsibility by providing support through frequent check-ins, technical assistance, and keeping team connection via virtual gatherings.

Intentional communication became crucial, with leaders employing strategies to keep teams engaged and informed while balancing the fine line between overcommunication and under-sharing. Safety, both physical and mental, was a top priority, particularly for teams with essential workers. Leaders implemented protocols and actively promoted mental health resources, acknowledging the pandemic's profound impact on employees' well-being. Team relationships highlighted the importance of trust, as leaders often had to invest more time and energy in guiding and supporting less reliable team members. Open dialogues were essential for addressing performance issues and exploring solutions collaboratively. The analysis underscores that leadership during the crisis involved adapting to new challenges, supporting the team in whichever way needed, prioritizing the well-being of team members, and ensuring that communication was clear and intentional.

## **Discussion**

The findings of this research answer the research question by illustrating how leaders enacted leadership in ways that differed from their usual practices. In this discussion, I will offer four theoretical implications and three practical implications. Then, I will provide an examination of the study's limitations and suggestions for future research directions. Previous research suggests that managing employees in a remote environment presents unique challenges and dynamics (Kelley & Kelloway, 2012). Leaders in this study confirmed the uniqueness of some of the challenges they faced in managing their teams and shared how they confronted these challenges. Key concerns included employee engagement, maintaining team cohesion, ensuring clear communication, and providing safety. The pandemic required leaders to rethink their communication methods, address low morale and engagement, and create a safe work environment. The theoretical implications support and add to the above-mentioned literature and the practical implications offer suggestions for leaders leading teams in crises. For many leaders, this was their first experience leading a team remotely, which presented unique challenges and learning opportunities. First, this study contributes insights by capturing their experiences, and sheds light on the strategies leaders used to better manage their teams during the extended crisis period of the pandemic. Moreover, this study further enhances the understanding of crisis leadership by exploring the differences in leading high-performing versus challenging team members during crisis.

### **Theoretical Implications**

This study offers significant contributions to the research on leadership during extended crises, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. By examining leadership strategies within the unique situation of a global pandemic, this study reinforces existing theories

and also provides new insights into the complexities of virtual leadership during an extended crisis. Theoretical implications emerging from this research extend existing literature by highlighting how leaders adapted to new challenges, especially in maintaining team morale, using intentional communication, addressing safety concerns, and team relationships. These implications underscore the role of leadership in navigating both expected and unexpected challenges, while also offering insights on how leaders can guide their teams through times of crisis.

### ***Boosting Morale***

This research contributes to the understanding of leadership in extended crises by revealing that, during the COVID-19 pandemic, leaders were proactive in implementing virtual gatherings as a new strategy to maintain team morale and cohesion. This extends previous literature by highlighting the importance of such strategies in a global crisis that affected all aspects of life, not just the workplace. Research shows that leaders play a key role in building personal and informal connections among virtual team members, which is often an overlooked aspect (Schmidt, 2014). This study supports Schmidt's findings by demonstrating that leaders were aware of the need to maintain these connections, especially during the prolonged remote work conditions imposed by COVID-19. Additionally, existing research emphasizes that leaders must consider the potential impact of remote work on social relationships and team cohesion (Kowalski & Ślebarska, 2022). One contribution of this study is offering an understanding of virtual leadership in the unique context of a global pandemic, which previous studies did not account for even when focusing on virtual teams. This study extends this understanding by showing that leaders not only recognized these challenges but also took measures to address them.

The shift to remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic impacted employee morale and presented unique challenges for leaders in supporting their teams during the absence of in-person interactions. Research by Nahar and Thakur (2022) highlights that the lack of face-to-face communication in organizations can lead to breakdowns in communication and a subsequent decline in morale. This study found that employee morale was affected due to the shift to remote work during the pandemic, which supports previous research on how crises can negatively affect morale. Additionally, this study adds to our understanding of crisis leadership by showing that in the context of an extended crisis, leaders were proactive in addressing these morale issues even before they became significant problems. While disengagement was not widely reported, the possibility of low morale remained a concern, particularly in the extended remote work conditions caused by the pandemic. The findings of this research show that leaders implemented preventative measures to boost morale and ensure team cohesion.

To keep social relationships among team members strong, many leaders organized virtual events, which was a strategy new to them but became essential during the pandemic. The type of virtual event varied in different teams. Some leaders organized virtual happy hours, others held lunch meetings, and some even facilitated online game sessions. While current research emphasizes the important role of leaders in maintaining close social relationships among team members (Kashive et al., 2022), this study extends that understanding by highlighting the unique role of virtual gatherings, implemented by leaders, as a helpful strategy to maintain social relationships in the specific context of COVID-19. The necessity of such gatherings as a social outlet became particularly prominent with pandemic restrictions. This finding shows that first, adaptability is required of leaders in extended crises and second, it adds to the literature by

showing how virtual gatherings can be effectively used to support team members in remote work settings.

This study adds to the existing literature by revealing that virtual gatherings can significantly boost morale, keep employees engaged, and enhance team cohesion during extended periods of remote work. Leaders recognized the profound impact of the pandemic on their team's emotional well-being and responded by implementing virtual happy hours, lunch meetings, and game sessions as a social support system to keep their teams "rallied, motivated, and functional." These gatherings provided a platform for team members to socialize, play games, and bond, which helped alleviate stress and isolation. Leaders emphasized the importance of these activities and noted their long-lasting positive effects, particularly in reinforcing the sense of community typically supported by regular office interactions. Previous studies, such as those by Ellis et al. (2020), have stated that the COVID-19 pandemic led to significant stress and isolation among employees, largely due to physical isolation, economic instability, and fear of infection. Building on these findings, this research highlights that leaders were conscious of these effects and developed innovative ways to adapt to these challenges and support their team members. Virtual gatherings were instrumental in maintaining team cohesion and keeping people connected during the remote work conditions imposed by the pandemic. These events provided a casual setting for team members to unwind and socialize, mimicking the informal chats that often occurred in the office. Participants in this study highlighted the importance of these events as they created supportive environments for interaction among members.

This study builds on existing literature by showing that virtual gatherings provided a valuable space for team members to share personal stories and experiences, which helped recreate the sense of closeness that can get lost in remote settings. Leaders in effective virtual

teams encourage team members to share personal stories and experiences (Malhotra et al., 2007), and virtual gatherings allowed team members to do so. Participants in this study emphasized the importance of maintaining moments of fun and connection. By adapting in-person traditions to virtual settings, such as organizing weekly meetings where team members could share anecdotes, leaders created a supportive and engaging environment. These meetings enabled team members to connect both professionally and personally, reinforcing team cohesion.

### ***Intentional Communication During the COVID-19 Crisis***

This study highlights the important role of intentional and frequent communication in supporting virtual teams during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings reveal that leaders increased the frequency of team touchpoints through regular check-ins, video meetings, and other communication channels, and their endeavors helped maintain team cohesion and ensured clarity in team members' roles and expectations. Existing research shows that crisis leadership involves guiding team members through unexpected and highly adverse situations and heavily relies on strong communication skills (DuBrin, 2013; Liu et al., 2016). Moreover, ensuring communication systems are developed and adequately maintained is a common recommendation for virtual teams (Malhotra et al., 2007). While this study supports the importance of communication in a crisis setting, it adds to the literature by revealing how leaders adapted their communication approaches to be more intentional in order to meet the unique challenges posed by remote work during the pandemic. Participants reported being more intentional in their communication, using frequent touchpoints to prevent misunderstandings and ensure all team members had a clear sense of direction. The theme of "intentional communication" emerged as a key finding, reflecting the deliberate efforts leaders made to connect with their teams. This study emphasizes that while communication is always important

during a crisis, the aspect of intentionality, highlighted by nearly all participants, is highly important in the remote settings during a crisis.

The findings showed that frequent check-ins were used as a strategy for supporting virtual teams by creating an intentional line of communication during the pandemic. Although studies such as one conducted by Walker et al. (2022) offers insights into leadership strategies during the pandemic, it does not explore the role of check-ins as a helpful strategy or the specific purposes they served. The findings of this study, however, provides insights by highlighting the role of check-ins as a leadership strategy during COVID-19 and detailing the multiple purposes they served, which existing literature has not extensively covered. To handle a crisis successfully, leaders must have regular, precise communication with their followers to reduce the chances of anxiety and misinformation (Foster et al., 2020). Effective communication is always a vital skill for leaders, but it becomes especially critical during a crisis. During such times, people urgently seek information about the current situation, measures being taken to manage the situation, and expectations for returning to normalcy (Martin, 2020). In this study, leaders reported that increasing the frequency of updates helped address urgent informational needs. These findings are in accordance with previous research in that there is pressure on leaders to deliver clear, impactful guidance and updates during a crisis (Martin, 2020).

Additionally, the findings contribute by demonstrating that remote leaders regularly facilitated intentional communication through platforms such as Skype and Teams, supporting existing literature that emphasizes remote management requires intentional efforts to facilitate communication and connect team members through various methods, such as chat, phone, or video (Coffey & Wolf, 2018). This study further shows that these frequent communications in the form of check-ins helped employees in multiple ways. First, check-ins were essential for

answering questions, reducing uncertainty, giving feedback, and clarifying tasks and deliverables, which helped maintain stability and alignment within teams despite the pandemic's uncertainties. Second, regular check-ins played a crucial role in reducing anxiety and promoting transparency within the team, ensuring that leaders stayed connected with their teams and addressed any concerns. Third, weekly check-ins were valuable for processing events, offering verbal feedback, and understanding non-verbal cues, with some teams adopting a dual-meeting structure to guide daily tasks and reflect on progress. Fourth, these consistent communications supported team success by fostering a supportive environment, allowing leaders to offer continuous positive reinforcement and personalized care, particularly for those affected by COVID-19.

This study also highlights that intentional communication is crucial in keeping team members engaged in remote settings. While this research supports previous findings about the challenges of engaging team members in virtual environments such as feelings of isolation, difficulty maintaining work-life balance, lack of face-to-face communication, and concerns about work not being valued (Sundin, 2010), it also adds to the literature by demonstrating how leaders used intentional communication tactics to involve less engaged team members. For example, when leaders noticed a lack of participation during virtual meetings, they employed strategies such as encouraging camera use and directly engaging quieter members. These actions were directed to encourage active involvement, ensuring that all team members felt included and were engaged enough to contribute.

During the pandemic, managing the amount of communication was critical for leaders. They needed to strike a balance between overcommunication and providing necessary information to avoid overwhelming their teams. This study aligns with existing research that

emphasizes the importance of balancing communication to prevent information overload (Bartoo & Sias, 2004). However, it contributes further by illustrating that these endeavors were part of leaders' intentional communication strategies during the pandemic. Leaders adapted their communication styles to ensure that messages were concise, clear, and relevant, helping teams stay informed without being burdened with unnecessary information.

Another key contribution of this study is the emphasis on the importance of tone and intent in virtual communication. The absence of contextual cues in remote settings can lead to misunderstandings, a challenge noted in research done by Olson & Olson 2000. However, this study found that leaders used curated communication techniques, such as emojis, explicit expressions of appreciation, and encouraging team members to keep their cameras on during virtual meetings. For example, by having their faces visible, leaders and team members were better able to pick up on non-verbal cues and facial expressions, making communication more intentional and reducing the likelihood of misunderstandings. This approach was particularly crucial during the pandemic, as the lack of physical presence made it more challenging for leaders to convey and interpret tone and intent accurately in their communications.

This study further supports crisis leadership literature by highlighting the need for flexibility in communication. Effective leadership in crises often involves adapting communication to meet the needs of each team member (Sommer et al., 2016; Mumford et al., 2007). This research builds on this theory by showing how leaders balanced personal and professional communication, empathizing with their team members' unique situations, and providing tailored support. By recognizing the diverse challenges faced by individuals during the pandemic, leaders used intentional communication to offer both flexibility and support, ensuring that personal issues were acknowledged without overshadowing work responsibilities.

Finally, the study highlights that intentional communication also involves being a good listener, which is a crucial component of curated communication. Participants noted that they spent considerable time listening to their team members' concerns, both professional and personal, a practice that aligns with existing literature on the importance of active listening in leadership (Baker et al., 2019; Younger, 2024; Beilstein et al., 2021). This study extends that literature by showing how active listening was particularly important during the pandemic, as it allowed leaders to understand the specific challenges their team members were facing and to provide the necessary support. By engaging in open communication, leaders tried to reassure their teams and address their anxieties, which further demonstrates the value of intentional communication in crisis leadership.

### ***Addressing Safety Concerns***

This study supports the existing literature by revealing, across various sectors, leaders prioritized employee safety as a primary concern during the COVID-19 pandemic, with a focus on both physical and mental health. After COVID-19 was declared a pandemic, a survey by a leading mental health care provider found that 69% of U.S. employees reported this period as the most stressful in their professional careers (Ginger, 2020). During the COVID-19 crisis, it became crucial for employers to prioritize employee safety and well-being (de Flamingh & Fairhall, 2020). While organizations have traditionally offered health benefits, the sudden outbreak of COVID-19 necessitated an immediate and enhanced emphasis on ensuring the physical and mental well-being of employees, bringing these concerns to the forefront of organizational priorities.

This study reinforces the importance of prioritizing employee safety during crises. Leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic took significant steps to support the physical health of

their employees by implementing comprehensive safety protocols (Dirani et al. 2020), which aligns with the findings of this study that shows leaders involvement in ensuring employee safety during the time of crisis. For example, leaders in this study tried to minimize contamination risk by reducing the number of people in enclosed spaces, enforcing social distancing, and providing personal protective equipment like masks and gloves. In addition to physical safety, leaders placed significant emphasis on mental health support, as they recognized the depth of stress and uncertainty inflicted on their team members by the pandemic.

This research also underscores the vital role of mental health support during crises, which is becoming more recognized in the literature. As noted by Stanz and Weber (2021), leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic recognized the significant mental health challenges faced by employees and actively made efforts to support their well-being. This study supports these findings by showing how leaders encouraged open communication about mental health, facilitated regular check-ins, and integrated wellness practices into daily routines. Leaders frequently reminded their team about these resources, encouraging them to seek help when needed, which was helpful in managing stress and anxiety. Aware of their team's mental health, leaders reminded them about available employee benefits. Moreover, leaders encouraged open communication about mental health, creating an environment where employees felt comfortable discussing their struggles. Regular check-ins and supportive dialogues were also effective in maintaining mental well-being. Activities such as brain breaks, mindfulness exercises, and promoting work-life balance were integrated into daily routines, further supporting employees' mental health. Leaders tried to be active in promoting both physical and mental health in the workplace, which shows the importance of a more comprehensive support system during a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic.

### ***Team Relationships During the COVID-19 Crisis***

The findings of this study add to the LMX literature by demonstrating that crisis conditions reinforce existing relationship dynamics rather than changing them. The consistency in leader-member interactions during the pandemic underscores the stability of LMX relationships. This finding is particularly significant as it suggests that leaders' strategies for managing team members remain effective regardless of external disruptions. The analysis reveals that the pandemic did not significantly change the nature of leader-member relationships. Positive team members continued to exhibit positive behaviors, and negative members remained difficult to manage. This finding suggests that the quality of leader-member relationships, as previous research suggests, is robust and enduring, even in times of crisis. Leaders noted that trust and mutual understanding with good team members facilitated smooth collaboration, while challenging members required persistent follow-ups and reminders, highlighting the established nature of these relationships. All participants highlighted that positive team members thrived with minimal direction, whereas negative members needed constant oversight and clear expectations, indicating that the fundamental dynamics of these relationships were unaffected by the pandemic.

My analysis of leader-member dynamics during the COVID-19 pandemic supports several claims of LMX theory. Leaders in the study managed positive and negative team members differently, consistent with LMX's emphasis on differentiated relationships. LMX literature highlights that leaders cultivate distinct relationships with each team member, starting from high-quality interactions built on trust, respect, to lower-quality interactions that are more transactional (Gerstner & Day, 1997). In this study, for instance, leaders described a good team member as someone who communicated well, showed teamwork, and willingly helped others,

qualities that remained consistent before, during, and after the pandemic. This supports the LMX literature that high-quality relationships are stable and lead to positive outcomes (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). In contrast, challenging team members required more effort and creative engagement strategies from leaders, reflecting lower-quality exchanges. Some leaders had to micromanage a challenging team member to ensure tasks were completed accurately, a behavior that persisted despite the pandemic. This supports claims in LMX theory that leaders develop varied relationships within their teams, with challenging members requiring more oversight and intervention (Gerstner & Day, 1997).

Moreover, this study supports LMX literature by highlighting trust as a crucial factor in managing team dynamics, which is consistent with the emphasis of current LMX research on trust as a key factor in shaping positive or negative leader-member relationships (Hirvi et al., 2021). Existing research has shown that followers' perceptions of leader trustworthiness significantly impact the quality of the LMX relationship and, subsequently, leaders' trust in their followers (Jawahar et al., 2019). In this study, leaders experienced varied levels of trust with different team members, which dictated their management style. Leaders' experience with a good team member was characterized by mutual respect and understanding, which made leadership easy and effective. This contrasts with their approach to a challenging member, where trust was lacking, necessitating a more assertive and directive management style.

Ultimately, the findings expand the LMX literature by revealing that crisis circumstances reinforce current relationship dynamics instead of changing them. Moreover, the findings support LMX literature by emphasizing the importance of trust in shaping leader-member relationships and demonstrates that trust is not static but varies across different team members, significantly impacting leadership strategies (Jawahar et al., 2019; Dirks & Ferrin, 2002).

## **Practical Implications**

The practical implications outlined in this section are informed by participants' responses, which reflect their experiences and beliefs about what leadership strategies yielded positive results during the pandemic. While these practices emerged in response to the unique challenges of COVID-19, they may also be applicable during other organizational crises where rapid changes and uncertainty demand adaptive leadership strategies. This section presents three key practical implications that leaders can apply in crisis situations. The first practical implication is that leaders should prioritize intentional and frequent communication with their employees during a crisis. The second is that leaders should support their employees by understanding and addressing their varied needs. Finally, the third practical implication is that leaders should create a safe environment for their employees, focusing on both their physical and mental well-being.

To begin, in times of crisis leaders should prioritize intentional, frequent communication to help maintain team cohesion. This is particularly crucial in situations of extended crises, where information can change rapidly, and the level of uncertainty is high, and the duration of the crisis is unknown. In such contexts, it is essential to keep employees informed about key decisions and updates to ensure employees are fully informed and are provided with a space to ask any questions they might have. To achieve this, frequent and intentional communication with team members can be a key focus for leaders. Regular check-ins, whether daily or weekly, provide a valuable opportunity for leaders to stay connected with their teams, address concerns, and offer support. Leaders might consider implementing regular check-in meetings, as seen in this study, where they helped keep employees stay informed without overwhelming them. Moreover, striking a balance between providing necessary information and avoiding over-communication is crucial, which means during a crisis leaders should carefully assess the

frequency and content of these communications. Moreover, in remote settings, video calls can be particularly effective, allowing leaders to pick up on non-verbal cues and better understand their team members' needs.

The purpose of these check-ins should not only be to discuss work-related tasks but also to provide emotional support and to provide a platform for leaders to listen to personal challenges of their team members. This practice helps in building trust, can boost morale and engagement and can help employees feel their leader provides a space for them to share their concerns in the stressful period of a crisis. Regular check-ins also offer opportunities for leaders to give feedback and adjust expectations based on individual circumstances. Regular check-ins with each team member are beneficial whether in a pandemic or not. Leaders in the study used this approach during the pandemic, but many continued it even after the crisis was over due to its positive outcomes.

Second, leaders can support their team members by offering technical assistance, creating a sense of community, and providing more flexible working conditions to accommodate their unique needs. Crises can bring sudden shifts in work modalities and physical separation and disrupt both personal and professional aspects of life. These abrupt changes can pose significant challenges for employees, such as adapting to new technologies and dealing with the isolation of remote work. In such situations, it is crucial for leaders to be mindful of these wide-ranging impacts and provide comprehensive support. By addressing these, leaders can help their teams better navigate the complexities of a crisis.

During a crisis, many employees may face challenges adapting to new technologies, especially if they are not tech-savvy. To ease the stress many employees face, particularly those who struggle with adapting to new technologies, leaders can offer technical support. This might

include sharing resources such as tutorials, creating easy-to-follow video guides on essential functions and troubleshooting tips, or forming support teams with tech-savvy employees who can assist others.

Leaders can support employees in a crisis by creating a sense of community. Virtual gatherings, which are informal in nature, provide employees with a platform to unwind, socialize, and share experiences. This practice essentially serves as virtual team building, and it was reported by participants to boost morale and engagement. Organizing online happy hours, lunch meetings, and game sessions can create a positive and supportive environment amidst the uncertainties and stressful conditions that a crisis might bring, helping to alleviate feelings of isolation and stress.

Another way for leaders to support employees during a crisis is by offering them flexibility and recognizing that personal circumstances during a crisis can vary widely and can affect work and performance. Leaders should also be mindful that different employees have different needs and may require varying levels of flexibility. One of the leaders noted that COVID-19 made them more humanistic, realizing that employees are more than just workers. They are individuals with personal lives and unique challenges. This realization, although seemingly obvious, can go a long way. Leaders should strive to create an environment where team members feel supported and valued. This involves recognizing both the personal and professional challenges faced by team members, especially during crises. Rather than always guessing what those needs might be, leaders could engage in open communication by asking questions such as, How can I support you during this time? and What can I do to make this process smoother for you? This simple act of asking can send the message to team members that their leader is aware of the specific challenges they face and is willing to tailor their support

accordingly. This flexibility can help employees balance work and personal life and can increase their overall job satisfaction. It is worthy to note that flexibility in work arrangements is crucial for supporting team members' physical and mental health as well.

Third, ensuring the physical safety of team members is paramount during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. Clear communication about safety guidelines and protocols is one way of doing that. Leaders can use emails and regular briefings to keep employees informed about the latest safety measures related to the crisis. Additionally, leaders should encourage employees to report any safety concerns in a timely manner to address potential issues before they escalate. Regular risk assessments and updates to protocols based on the latest health guidelines can create a safe working environment. A strategy one of the participants implemented was to give extra paid sick days to employees, so they would not be afraid to miss work and lose pay. It was a way for the leader to show everyone that physical safety mattered, and they were willing to provide extra support and care so people would self-report as soon as they felt they were contaminated.

The mental health of team members is equally important and requires support from leaders. Providing access to mental health services, such as therapy and counseling, is crucial during a crisis. Depending on the organization and its policies and benefits, employees might have different options available to them. However, regardless of the type of offered services, leaders should remind team members regularly about these resources and encourage their use. Even if these services are not directly provided leaders can set up partnerships with mental health professionals and have them offer confidential counseling sessions to help employees manage stress and anxiety. Hosting workshops and webinars on mental health topics can educate employees and provide them with tools to manage their well-being. Leaders can bring in

inspirational speakers or experts in the field of well-being to talk and host open Q&A sessions can further support the mental health of employees.

Incorporating wellness practices into the daily routine can also enhance overall well-being. Leaders can introduce “brain breaks,” where employees take short breaks to rest and recharge, and mindfulness exercises, such as guided meditation or deep-breathing exercises, to help reduce stress. Offering flexible work schedules can allow employees to balance work demands with personal responsibilities, reducing burnout.

More importantly, creating a culture that prioritizes mental health is essential. Leaders can start by openly discussing mental health issues and sharing their experiences, which can help break the stigma and encourage employees to seek help. Providing training for managers on how to recognize signs of mental health struggles and how to support employees effectively can further strengthen this culture. Leaders should also be eager to learn about available mental health resources and stay updated on best practices. Regularly reviewing and updating mental health policies to ensure they meet the needs of employees is also helpful. COVID-19 heightened awareness of mental health issues and broke some of the stigma around discussing this topic. As a result, talking about mental health at work has become more acceptable. While safety is a primary concern during a global health crisis, any crisis, whether health-related or not, can elevate anxiety, stress, and uncertainty. Leaders should recognize this and address mental health even outside of crisis situations. Understanding that employees experience life in diverse ways, leaders should ensure that mental health discussions are ongoing and not limited to times of crisis.

In summary, these practical implications highlight how important it is for leaders to support their employees during times of crisis. By focusing on clear communication, offering

flexibility, and taking care of both physical and mental well-being, leaders can help create a supportive and resilient work environment. These strategies are in a crisis and can help employees feel valued in their roles.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

This study focused on leaders whose teams experienced a change in work modality during the COVID-19 pandemic, transitioning from in-person to hybrid or remote formats. Although this study provided insights into how leaders managed team dynamics under this condition, several limitations were identified, and future research can build upon these findings to deepen our understanding of leadership and team dynamics in crisis contexts. Some limitations include the study's focus on teams transitioning to remote or hybrid work, the reliance on leaders' perspectives, and the use of a qualitative approach. In this section, I discuss the implications of these limitations and propose directions for future research. These include expanding the participant pool to include more diverse perspectives and considering alternative theoretical frameworks.

To begin, the study's focus on teams transitioning from in-person to remote or hybrid work overlooks those teams that did not experience significant changes in their work modality. For instance, teams in sectors like healthcare, emergency services, and manufacturing industries continued to operate largely in-person. The dynamics within these teams, where the mode of work remained constant, could differ significantly from those in teams that experienced modality shifts. Therefore, one limitation of this study is its limited focus on teams with essential workers. While some leaders in the study managed teams with members who had to work both in-person (rotationally) and remotely, the majority of participants did not fall into this category. Essential workers, such as nurses, doctors, and other frontline professionals, continued their roles in-

person throughout the pandemic, facing distinct challenges compared to those who transitioned to remote or hybrid models. It is worthwhile to explore team dynamics and leadership strategies specific to the consistently in-person essential workers. Understanding how leaders supported their teams under continuous high-stress, high-risk conditions can provide a deeper understanding of crisis leadership and resilience-building strategies. Although there are studies focusing on essential workers' mental health during COVID-19 (Mata-Greve et al., 2021; Toh et al., 2021) and wage issues (Capasso et al., 2022), there is a notable gap in research specifically addressing the leaders who lead such teams and their team dynamics. Future research can also examine how leadership strategies and team dynamics differ between essential and non-essential teams and conduct a comparative study. Understanding these differences can provide a more nuanced view of how various work environments impact leadership effectiveness and team cohesion during crises.

Next, this research focused on the dyadic relationships between leaders and their team members during the pandemic but solely relied on leaders' perspectives to gather data. While this approach made the scope feasible and narrow enough, providing insights about leadership strategies and perceived outcomes, it presents a one-sided view. Leaders' insights offer an important perspective on the actions and intentions behind their strategies, as well as the outcomes they believe resulted from these actions. However, understanding the full impact of these leadership strategies requires input from team members as well. Future studies can include both leaders and team members to obtain a more holistic understanding of these dynamics. By incorporating the experiences of team members, researchers can gain a different view of how leadership strategies were received and interpreted at all levels of the organization. Including team members in the research can help in several ways. First, it can validate the effectiveness of

the leadership strategies from the employees' standpoint, ensuring that the intended support and motivation were genuinely felt. Second, it can uncover any discrepancies between leaders' intentions and employees' experiences. For instance, a leader might believe that their communication strategy was clear and supportive, but team members might have felt confused or overlooked. Finally, understanding both leaders' and team members' experiences can provide data that is effective in shaping future leadership training programs to address real employee/leader needs and challenges.

Additionally, this study relied on Leader-Member Exchange theory to drive the research. While LMX provided new insights into the dynamics between leaders and their team members during the pandemic, leadership during COVID-19 can be studied through the lens of other foregrounding theories. One of the main themes that emerged from this study was support, which suggests that exploring leadership during the pandemic from a social support perspective might yield worthwhile insights. The social support literature emphasizes the importance of emotional, instrumental, informational, and appraisal support in helping individuals cope with stress and adversity (Hupcey, 1998; Lakey & Cohen, 2000; Afifi et al., 2006). Using social support literature could deepen the understanding of how leaders provide various forms of support to their teams during crises, potentially revealing different dimensions of effective leadership. While there are studies on social support during COVID-19 (Labrague, 2021; Mai et al., 2021; Ferber et al., 2022), hardly any research has been done through the lens of leadership in this context. Future research could benefit from investigating how leaders' efforts to offer social support impact employee well-being, resilience, and performance during crises like COVID-19.

Next, this study used a qualitative approach, focusing on semi-structured interviews with leaders. While this method allowed for rich, detailed narratives, it also has its limitations such as

small sample size and limited generalizability. Future research could benefit from employing mixed-method approaches, combining qualitative interviews with quantitative surveys.

Quantitative surveys can complement qualitative interviews by offering broader data points and validate findings from qualitative studies, while interviews can offer deeper insights into specific issues. Some variables to measure could be leader adaptability to remote work, employee morale levels, perceived leader support for work-life balance, and even level of trust in leadership decisions. Surveys can reach a larger sample size, making it possible to generalize the results to a wider population. They can also identify patterns and trends that may not be apparent in qualitative data alone. Quantitative methods typically aim to answer the “what questions” by generalizing about communicative behavior (Allen & Hunt 2008). For example, surveys can reveal common challenges faced by employees, general satisfaction levels with leadership approaches, and the overall effectiveness of specific strategies. Additionally, surveys could explore the impact of remote work on team dynamics, the perceived fairness of decisions made during the crisis, the accessibility of leaders, and even the effectiveness of crisis-specific training programs.

Finally, the participant pool for this study was primarily composed of leaders based in the United States, with two-thirds being Caucasian and male. Future research should aim to include a more diverse participant base, encompassing various cultural, geographic, and ethnic backgrounds. Such diversity can reveal different leadership practices and team dynamics that may be influenced by cultural norms and geography. Many studies have shown leadership practices can vary significantly across different cultures (Taleghani et al, 2010; Den Hartog & Dickinson 2004), and in some cases, these practices may even be conflicting (Dorfman et al., 1997). Therefore, including participants from different countries and cultures can reveal how

various regions and cultures handled the transition to remote or hybrid work during the pandemic.

## **Conclusion**

This study sheds light on how leaders navigated the uncertain environment created by the COVID-19 pandemic. Exploring how leadership evolved in response to new challenges reveals the power of intentional communication, the importance of support and team connection, and the need to prioritize both physical and mental well-being. Ultimately, this research offers a glimpse into how leaders can rise to the occasion, guiding their teams through times of crisis with commitment, empathy, and creativity.

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## **APPENDIX A:**

### **RECRUITMENT EMAIL**

Dear [Participant's Name]

I hope this email finds you well. My name is Parnian Shahbazian, and I am a master's student from the Communication Studies Department at Colorado State University. I am conducting a research study titled "Interpersonal Dynamics in Post-COVID Workplace Transitions: A Leader-Member Relationship Perspective." My thesis advisor, Dr. Elizabeth Williams, is the Principal Investigator for this project.

We invite you to participate in an interview to explore your experiences related to workplace transitions during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, mainly focusing on the relationships leaders had with their members and the impact of remote/hybrid work settings on how leaders led their teams. Our research aim is to gain insights into how the relationship between leaders and members in light of COVID-19 crisis influences critical aspects of crisis management, communication, and organizational dynamics.

The interview will be conducted at a convenient time for you and can take place via Teams/Zoom. Your valuable input will contribute to our understanding of leadership in addressing challenges, and the importance of interpersonal relationship between leaders and members during organizational crises.

As a token of our appreciation for your participation, you will receive a \$20 Amazon gift card.

The interview is expected to last between 45-60 minutes.

Participation in this research is entirely voluntary, and you may withdraw your consent without penalty. Your confidentiality is paramount, and all identifying information will be handled carefully. Your name and contact information will only be used for scheduling purposes and will not be connected to your research responses.

While there are no direct benefits to you, your participation will contribute significantly to our understanding of the intricate role of leader-member relationships during organizational crises, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. You may experience distress when remembering difficult experience of the pandemic, however, this is no greater risk than if you were to talk about the pandemic in your day-to-day life.

If you want to participate or have questions, please contact me at  
leadership.psh@gmail.com

If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact the CSU IRB at CSU\_IRB@colostate.edu at 970-491-1553.

## **APPENDIX B:**

### **RECRUITMENT EMAIL – SNOWBALL**

Dear [Participant's Name],

I hope this email finds you well. My name is Parnian Shahbazian, and I am a master's student from the Communication Studies Department at Colorado State University. I am conducting a research study titled "Interpersonal Dynamics in Post-COVID Workplace Transitions: A Leader-Member Relationship Perspective." My thesis advisor, Dr. Elizabeth Williams, is the Principal Investigator for this project.

I am reaching out to you as a potential participant in our study. Your name was referred to me by [Name of the reference], who kindly recommended you based on your experiences working during the COVID-19 pandemic.

We invite you to participate in an interview to explore your experiences related to workplace transitions during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, mainly focusing on the relationships leaders had with their members and the impact of remote/hybrid work settings on how leaders led their teams. Our research aim is to gain insights into how the relationship between leaders and members in light of COVID-19 crisis influences critical aspects of crisis management, communication, and organizational dynamics.

The interview will be conducted at a convenient time for you and can take place via Teams/Zoom. Your valuable input will contribute to our understanding of leadership in addressing challenges, and the importance of interpersonal relationship between leaders and members during organizational crises.

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Participation in this research is entirely voluntary, and you may withdraw your consent without penalty. Your confidentiality is paramount, and all identifying information will be handled carefully. Your name and contact information will only be used for scheduling purposes and will not be connected to your research responses.

While there are no direct benefits to you, your participation will contribute significantly to our understanding of the intricate role of leader-member relationships during organizational crises, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. You may experience distress when remembering difficult experience of the pandemic, however, this is no greater risk than if you were to talk about the pandemic in your day-to-day life.

If you want to participate or have questions, please contact me at [leadership.psh@gmail.com](mailto:leadership.psh@gmail.com)

If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact the CSU IRB at [CSU\\_IRB@colostate.edu](mailto:CSU_IRB@colostate.edu) at 970-491-1553.

## APPENDIX C:

### RECRUITMENT – SOCIAL POST

**Research Study on Leadership during COVID-19**

**Participate in a virtual one-hour interview and receive a \$20 Amazon Gift Card!**

For more information and to schedule an interview, please contact:  
Co-PI: Parnian Shahbazian  
Master's student,  
Colorado State University  
[parnian.shahbazian96@gmail.com](mailto:parnian.shahbazian96@gmail.com)

- Participants must be adults (18+ years old) and proficient in English.
- Must have been employed in the same organization from Jan 2020-Jan 2022
- Participants should also have led a team (managing a team during COVID-19 even if it's a small team)

**What is the study about?**

This study explores how leaders navigated COVID-19, focusing on remote work, and team relationships.

## APPENDIX D:

### SCREENING SURVEY

#### Start of Block: Introduction

Q1 Thanks for considering taking part in our study!

Please complete the following screening survey to determine your eligibility. If you meet the study's criteria, you will be asked to provide your contact information to schedule an interview.

If you have questions, please contact me at [parnian.shahbazian96@gmail.com](mailto:parnian.shahbazian96@gmail.com)

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Page Break

Q2 Were you employed in the same organization from Jan 2020 - Jan 2022?

Yes (1)

No (2)

Q3 Did you lead a team through the duration of this time?

Yes (1)

No (2)

Q4 Did you experience a shift of work modality during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Ex.: From in-person to hybrid/remote, or from hybrid to remote, or any other variation.

Yes (1)

No (2)

Q5 Are you 18 years or older?

Yes (1)

No (2)

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End of Block: Introduction

**Start of Block: Contact Information**

Q6 What is your name?

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Q7 What is your email address?

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Q8 On what platform do you want the interview to take place?

Teams (1)

Zoom (2)

Q9 What are some available dates and times for you to meet this or next week?

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Q10 What is your Time Zone?

Eastern (1)

Central (2)

Mountain (3)

Pacific (4)

End of Block

**APPENDIX E:**

**TABLE 1: PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS**

<b>Participant Pseudonym</b>	<b>Role during the Pandemic</b>	<b>Industry</b>	<b>Team Size</b>	<b>Tenure</b>
Alex	Chief Data and Information Security Officer	City Government Technology	40	9 years
Benjamin	Project Manager	Construction	50	14 years
Chad	Department Chair	Higher Education	65	24 years
Daniel	Regional Project Scheduler	Construction	5	5 years, 6 months
Eddie	Lead consultant for Resolution and Recovery	Financial Services	12	18 years
Liz	Managing Director	Film and Media Exhibition	3	6 years
Merriam	Content Manager	Financial Services	7	5 years
Morris	Content and Creative Services manager	City Government	10	6 years
Natalie	Campus Relations Program Manager	City Government HR Talent Acquisition	2	7 years
Sean	Senior Project Manager	Construction	45	24 years
Suzie	Teacher Supervisor	Telecommunication Company	35	4 years

Zachery	Executive Leader	Nonprofit	5	5 years
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## APPENDIX F:

### VERBAL CONSENT

My name is Parnian Shahbazian, and I am a master's student from the Communication Studies Department at Colorado State University. I am conducting a research study titled "Interpersonal Dynamics in Post-COVID Workplace Transitions: A Leader-Member Relationship Perspective." This study is about leaders' experiences related to workplace transitions during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, mainly focusing on the relationships leaders had with their members and the impact of remote/hybrid work settings on how they led their teams. My thesis advisor, Dr. Elizabeth Williams, is the Principal Investigator for this project.

I would like you to answer a few questions on your experiences with your team members during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as your experiences doing remote work during the pandemic and after. Participation will take approximately an hour. Your participation in this research is voluntary. If you decide to participate in the study, you may withdraw your consent and stop participation at any time without penalty.

We will be collecting your name, age, gender, and ethnicity. We will use pseudonyms to protect your privacy. There are no direct benefits to you, but we hope to gain more knowledge on interpersonal relationships between leaders and members during crises. You may experience distress when remembering difficult experience of the pandemic, however, this is no greater risk than if you were to talk about the pandemic in your day-to-day life. As a sign of appreciation for your participation and your time we would like to offer a 20\$ Amazon gift card to each participant.

In this research study, all identifiers, such as personal information or participant-specific details, will be removed from the identifiable private information. Once such identifiers are removed, the de-identified information may be used for future research studies without seeking additional informed consent from the subject or their legally authorized representative.

Our interview will be audio-recorded and transcribed by the software to then be used for data analysis. Are you comfortable with that?

Would you like to participate?

If yes: Proceed.

If no: Thank you for your time.

You can contact me at [leadership.psh@gmail.com](mailto:leadership.psh@gmail.com) if you have any questions.

If you have questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact the CSU IRB at: [CSU\\_IRB@colostate.edu](mailto:CSU_IRB@colostate.edu); 970-491-1553.).

## APPENDIX G:

### INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Thank you for agreeing to participate and share your experiences with me. I'll be asking you a series of questions, and feel free to respond in a way that feels most comfortable for you. You have the option to decline answering any question you're not comfortable with.

1. Please give me a brief overview of your role within the organization and your responsibilities during the pandemic.
2. Tell me about what it was like to work during the pandemic.
  - How did the work modality change during that time?
3. Tell me about the team that you lead.
  - How big was your team?
4. What were the advantages or challenges you faced leading your team as a result of hybrid/virtual work settings?
5. What were some of the key challenges you encountered in managing and motivating your team members remotely during the pandemic?
  - Were there any particular strategies or initiatives you implemented for your team?
  - How did you boost team morale while working remotely or in hybrid setups?
6. What kind of pressure did you feel as a leader during a time of crisis?
  - What were some of the big challenges you faced leading your team during the COVID-19 crisis?
  - What were the opportunities the pandemic provided you with to better lead your team?
  - What were the silver linings of the pandemic for you as a leader?
7. How did you have to adapt your leadership style because of the changes in the mode of work?
8. How would you describe your relationship with your team members throughout the pandemic?

I want you to think about your team...

9. Think of a person you'd consider a good team member.

- Tell me about your relationship with that person before, during and after the pandemic.
10. Think of a person you'd consider a more challenging team member to lead.
    - Tell me about your relationship with that person before, during and after the pandemic.
  11. With these two people in mind, please talk about the differences in how you approached leading them.
  12. How did your relationship with the team influence their adjustment to remote/hybrid work?
  13. How did your relationship with the team influence the team's adjustment to the return to in-person work?
  14. I know I asked you a lot of questions today. Is there anything you want to tell me that I might have missed or forgotten to ask?

### **Demographic Questions**

1. What industry is the position in?
2. How long have you been/were you with the organization?
3. How old are you?
4. How do you identify your gender?
5. How do you identify your racial identity?
6. What is the highest degree or level of education you have completed?

**APPENDIX H:**

TABLE 2: SECONDARY CODES AND THEMES

<b>Secondary Codes</b>	<b>Theme</b>	<b>Exemplar Quote</b>
Communication challenge Open communication How much to communicate Expectations of church work Humanistic approach Overcommunication Internal communication challenge Consider others' unique situation	<b>Intentional Communication</b> Intentional communication highlights the deliberate strategies leaders put in place to engage with their teams during the pandemic such as maintaining clarity and transparency, balancing the amount of information shared.	“The adaptation was to be more intentional, more clear, and sometimes a little over-communicative to get the point across” (Zachery, Executive Leader)
Being more available Ways to motivate employees Servant leadership Cheerleading Employee engagement Work-life balance Frequent Check-ins	<b>Support</b> This highlights leaders' efforts to help their teams through the pandemic by providing technical assistance, frequent check-ins, virtual gatherings, and offering flexibility to adapt to new working conditions.	“We established something new that we didn't do before. Having daily meetings. Every day, we had one meeting in the morning and one at the end of the day to ensure we were on track and that everyone knew exactly what to do.” (Daniel, Project Manager)
Fear for safety Safety uncertainty Essential workers Providing safety and comfort Mental health struggles Safety messaging	<b>Safety</b> Leaders wanted to protect their employees during the COVID-19 pandemic, by implementing physical safety measures to prevent infection but also focusing on mental well-being.	“I felt a strong responsibility to keep my team members healthy, both mentally and physically, during the pandemic. I wanted to be there for my team.” (Alex, Chief Data and Information Security Officer)
Differentiated management approaches Performance and reliability Trust Amount of supervision Providing support Adaptation Relational role	<b>Leadership and Team Relationships</b> Occurred when participants felt they had to balance between authenticity and performance. Includes what happened when they felt they <i>could not</i> balance the two.	“I focused less on the good team members because they were dependable, and I could count on them. For the ones who weren't as good, I spent a lot more time trying to help them get to where they needed to be.” (Benjamin, Project Manager)

## APPENDIX I:

### THEMES AND SUBTHEMES

