KEY INSIGHTS INTO MANAGERIAL CHALLENGES AND PRACTICES DURING PANDEMIC: PREPARING FOR A VUCA WORLD

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: To provide guidance and prepare managers for future crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic. This study has been conducted with an aim to examine the challenges faced and the practices adopted by the managers working across different industries in different functional areas of management during COVID-19 pandemic.

Background: The pandemic presented the managers with unprecedented challenging situations, necessitating the development of new strategies and approaches. This study explores the practical knowledge gained by managers through their experiences in handling unexpected managerial challenges.

Methods: Qualitative research employing a descriptive phenomenology research design was conducted. In-depth interviews were conducted with managers at different levels, using open-ended questions to gather their responses.

Findings: The research findings indicate emergence of following themes: (a) Emphasis on health, safety employee well-being; (b) Communication and transparency; (c) Work from home; (d) Increased use of technology; (e) Reorientation of supply chain management; (f) Reskilling, training and development; (g) Cost-optimisation; (h) Customer engagement; (i) Improved crisis management capabilities; (j) Risk Management; (k) Strategic Planning; (l) Collaboration and communication.

Conclusions: The key insights that emerged from the research indicate that the experiences of the managers and the practises they adopted will be of immense advantage to effectively deal with a similar crisis in future. The experiences and practices adopted by managers during the COVID-19 pandemic can serve as a resource for dealing with similar catastrophic events.

Keywords: COVID-19, Crisis Management, Human Resource Management, Managerial Challenges and Practices, VUCA.

INTRODUCTION

The outcomes of the pandemic have been a series of unparalleled and disruptive global implications in all walks of human life which includes both individual and collective aspects of our cultural, social, economic, and business management system. It has certainly changed our way of life in a way that the individuals and societies have been compelled to rethink as to how should they live and work. No one in the world was prepared, equipped, or even expected the magnitude of the crisis and to deal with it. It was devastating for all types of businesses causing significant losses in terms of men, material, and services.

Although most of the organisations do prepare themselves for the unexpected times and catastrophes but this time the best prepared, watchful, and adaptive organizations were

also found grappling with the sudden uncertain fluid situation created by imposition of nationwide lockdown due to COVID-19 pandemic. The sudden onslaught of the COVID-19 not only disrupted the businesses but also put the lives of employees at risk, which made the business decisions very difficult, especially for the small and medium business units, it became an existential crisis. Some of them lost the battle and some other could survive by re-orienting and adapting to the changed circumstances either by giving a new direction or developing a fresh strategy for their businesses. The immediate challenge faced by the organizations was to ensure safe health and upholding the employee engagement as well as motivation, and at the same time devise and implement new work processes. According to Meister (2020), the pandemic forced the organizations to develop and implement fresh norms for the jobs to be done and in fact it changed the way the work was being done earlier. Extensive use of technology to work from home became a new norm, and that itself brought new challenges like employee selection, training, work-life balance, stress management, moonlighting, and handling layoffs etc. Several studies have been carried out, which provide us an insight into this mystifying crisis, but most of them are either on health management and related issues (Salvador-Carulla et al., 2020), or related to small businesses (Alves et. al., 2020) or private family-based enterprises (Kraus et. al., 2020) and are conceptual in nature.

This research investigates how managers at various levels responded to the sudden onslaught of COVID-10 pandemic, declaration of nationwide lockdown, challenges they faced in handling the crises through its different stages. This study provides us the key learnings bringing new knowledge for the future managers as well as the organisations enabling them to manage such crises in future and continue to grow.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The objective of this study was to examine the challenges faced and practices followed by managers, of different functional areas and of different industries across different industries, during pandemic. This paper also recommends ways to overcome these challenges by the managers in the VUCA world.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The COVID-19 pandemic presented unprecedented challenges for business managers in India, requiring them to prioritize employee health and safety, ensure transparent communication, enable remote work, embrace technology, manage supply chains, invest in employee training, implement cost-cutting measures, engage customers, and enhance crisis management capabilities. Initially slow and reactive, managers gradually learned and took various steps to effectively manage the crisis. They implemented health and safety protocols, prioritized employee well-being through mental health resources and flexible work arrangements and maintained transparent communication with regular updates on safety protocols and policies. Work-from-home policies were implemented, requiring new management strategies for productivity and collaboration. Digital marketing, e-commerce, and customer service were emphasized for enhanced customer engagement. Risk management became crucial, addressing supply chain disruptions, financial instability, and cybersecurity threats. Strategic planning was re-evaluated to adapt to the changing market landscape, consumer behaviour, and regulations. Collaboration and communication strategies were adjusted to facilitate remote work. These adaptations ensured employee safety, business continuity, and resilience, enabling companies to emerge stronger. Key learnings included the surge in e-commerce, implementation of contactless delivery options, adoption of subscription-based models, supply chain diversification, shift towards virtual events, cost

optimization, and enhanced focus on employee well-being. The pandemic compelled managers to adapt and build resilient businesses, leading to new opportunities.

In fact, a study by the International Monetary Fund indicates that the world's uncertainty rate has increased dramatically since the 2010s and reaches the all-time highest point of the last 60 years by the end of 2019 (Ahir et al., 2020). Some notable events causing global fluctuations in the last 10-years are sovereign debt crisis in Europe, US-China trade tensions, Brexit, growing terrorism threats, cybercriminals, and climate change. Furthermore, the extraordinary year - 2020 can be considered as a representative case of how VUCA the world has evolved. The emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic at the beginning of 2020 leads to several paradigm shifts ranging from individual to organizational, personal to professional across industries (Howe et al., 2020). According to an International Labour Organisation (ILO) assessment, the spread of the new coronavirus has jeopardised more than 2.5 crore employment worldwide, which is a challenge for the organisations as well as managers (Gupta et al, 2024).

Additionally, the escalated VUCA world that organizations face nowadays is the consequence of technological development, the globalization process, and the environment (climate change, population growth, migration) (Friedman, 2016). The movement from an industrial to an information economy, along with the emergence of automation, outsourcing, deregulation, personal computing, and the Internet are all identified as drivers behind this dynamic business environment (Deloitte, 2015).

Under the impression that business environments become increasingly more VUCA, it is challenging for both established companies and startups around the world to gain and remain competitive in a highly disruptive context. Nevertheless, a survey by Deloitte (2017) reveals that despite recognizing how highly turbulent and uncertain the current business world has evolved, organizations feel "*inadequately prepared*" to respond effectively to this dynamic environment. A world characterized by VUCA might bring much confusion and fear; however, leaders are not allowed to stay frozen and passive toward this change as the dynamic also delivers new business opportunities (Johansen & Euchner, 2013). Therefore, with the transition toward the "new normal", leaders and business managers need to transform and develop a strategic approach to a VUCA world to position the organization for success in the long run.

Literature, on handling such unprecedented crisis situations in the business world, which could assist a business manager to face it, is grossly inadequate. A few significant research studies, on handling such unprecedented crisis situations by human resource managers are, Rowley & Bae, (2004); Smith & Abdullah, (2004); Lee & Warner (2005); Zhu, (2005); Hutchins and Wang (2008); Wang et al., (2009); Gunnigle et al., (2019) etc. All these studies, either concern the financial or health crisis situations. The only other such a situation faced by the human race, which could be compared to COVID-19, was World War II, which created such challenges for the business managers to manage the crisis.

Method

This study utilized a descriptive research design, employing interviews conducted with a semi-structured interview guide (Appendix 1). The paper has been written using qualitative methods and presents interview-derived findings. The researchers followed the consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative research (COREQ) checklist to report their methods and results accurately.

Research Design

Research design refers to the overall strategy and plan for conducting a scientific study. It outlines the methods and procedures for collecting and analysing data to address research questions. Descriptive Phenomenology, a qualitative research method was applied to the present research to understand the lived experiences of Managers who had faced the COVID-19 challenge and had used several interventions to overcome the challenges and crisis during that period. This type of qualitative research method has been widely used in social sciences. The question to the respondents relates to the "*what*" and "*how*" of the lived experience of that particular experience. The phenomenological approach, which investigates personal human experience, is frequently employed to address fundamental inquiries that underpin rationality (Lopez & Willis, 2004). There are two main types of phenomenological approaches to qualitative research (Cohen & Omery, 1994 in Lopez and Willis, 2004). One is the Husserl's (1970) Descriptive Tradition, where the aim of the research is to achieve transcendental subjectivity. This means that the effects of any kind of biasness from the researcher or any preconceived notions are not influential in creating any kind of impact on the results or outcomes of the research. The other type of phenomenological approach is Heidegger the Interpretive Tradition, where the focus is on the experience of human and not their prior knowledge (Solomon, 1987). For the present research the option two of Heidegger interpretive tradition is used as the managers who were interviewed had no prior experience of the challenge that COVID-19 had imposed on them almost overnight. Descriptive phenomenology has been previously used in the study of research of an organization, leadership, hospitality management and management practices (Jackson et al., 2018; Gill 2014; Anosike et al., 2012; Olivares, et al., 2007.

Participants and Sampling Technique

For this study, only managers from the IT industry who had hands-on experience managing employees during the COVID-19 period were selected. This criterion was established to ensure that all responses in the protocol were substantiated and aligned with the prerequisites specified before proceeding with the interviews. In other words, only those managers who had actual experience managing people during the pandemic were considered. Purposive sampling technique was therefore deployed in selecting the managers. Based on Cresswell and Clark 2011 this method of sampling technique process entails recognizing and choosing individuals or groups of individuals who possess particular expertise or extensive experience with a phenomenon that is of interest.

Interview Protocol Design

Using the Jacob and Furgerson's (2012) the interview protocol tips for qualitative research, the protocol used for the present study was prepared. The question was always daunting of how did the managers worked during the pandemic and overcome the challenges? Therefore, the topic was carefully chosen as the markets had opened up, pandemic almost near to an end and people were now available for the interview. Previous literature was only referred to frame the questions for the interview and not to create any kind of biasness. Participant's informed consent was prepared including information on research and confidentiality of their responses. This was then circulated prior to the interview to the participants and the consent form taken (Creswell, 2013). The participants sample size in phenomenological research can range in between 2 to 25 (Alase, 2017). Data was collected from managers with the set interview protocol between October and November 2022. Few

managers were approached for interviews based on the set criteria of the lived experiences that they have had during the pandemic and those, who were in the managerial position at the same time. There were 12 managers who were available and willing for the interview. Names of the participants and their respective organizations were disguised. The interview protocol was used to design the questionnaire to understand the lived experience of the managers. Some were adopted and some were created keeping in mind the scenario. The open-ended questions were pertaining to the key learnings from Covid-19, impact of the same on management functions, challenges that were imposed on managers, skills that played an important role during the pandemic and the strategies that were deployed by the mangers to overcome these challenges. According to Creswell (2012), one crucial aspect of qualitative research is selecting the appropriate participants or sites that can provide valuable insight into the central phenomenon being studied.

FINDINGS

What are your key learnings from the COVID -19?

Learning and setting clear goals

Employees need to continuously learn and set clear goals to be successful in any organization. Goal setting as such enhances an employee's performance and achieves job satisfaction. Similarly, continuous learning and development have been shown to improve employees' skills, knowledge, and overall job performance. In today's fast-paced business environment, it is crucial for employees to stay up to date with emerging trends and technologies to remain relevant and competitive. By investing in their professional development and setting clear goals, employees can take ownership of their careers and contribute to the growth and success of the organization they work for. Therefore, organizations should encourage their employees to continuously learn and set clear goals, providing them with the necessary resources and support to achieve their objectives. COVID-19 came as such an opportunity for the employees for learning and setting their goals and it emerges from the lived experiences of the respondents P3, P4, P5, P6, P8, P9, P10, and P12.

"We should have diverse team; I mean we should have a hybrid work environment, we should be ready to work in such situations in case if in future any such pandemic occurs then we should be well prepared" **P3.**

"We have moved from work from office to home and balanced our work" **P4.**

"The communication skills are my key learning where I really should focus on that thing" **P5.**

"We learned a lot of computer skills and a new kind of methodology in management" **P6.**

"You have to be very motivated in terms of your work, you have to develop your skills. So, the key learnings were never stop learning even if you're sitting in your room the entire day" **P8.**

"Be prepared for any casualty or any sudden events and as per as to make your business running you need to adopt new marketing tools, communication tools and keep your customer inform so that business can run smoothly" **P9.**

"You should be focused on your work rather seeing the progress or the work of other's company. and it is very technical on it is very technical one, but one should be aware of the recent trend in technology to keep it updated" **P10**.

"Rather than meeting a person, e-mail, video conferencing can also used for meetings and work from home is also trending so much that time" **P12**.

Health and Family

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought to light the importance of health and family for employees of organizations and the same has been brought out by respondents P1, P2, P7 and P11. Research articles suggest that individuals who prioritize their health and maintain a good work-life balance are more productive and have better mental health. The pandemic has also highlighted the crucial role of family support in maintaining employee well-being, especially for those who have had to balance work and caregiving responsibilities. Organizations can support their employees by offering wellness programs, flexible work arrangements, and access to mental health resources. By doing so, employees can prioritize their health and family while still meeting work demands. This not only benefits the individual employee but also contributes to the overall success and productivity of the organization during this challenging time.

"Vaccines are powerful tools and I think we need to take mental health seriously now" **P1.**

"First of all, many people have learned about the respiratory pathogens and various viruses that have spread from one person to another. Second thing is that while there are still problems for which you need to see a doctor or a person the pandemic introduces a new urgency to what had been gradually switch over platform like zoom, for remote patients visit. Third thing is that this time we were likely able to build up on strength that we have learnt from the many other vaccine that develop strategies to develop vaccines for covid -19" **P2.**

"According to me government to take action are we can say that review their budgetary review towards the healthcare operations and hospitality, hospitals and medical education to ready for the pandemic" **P7.**

"During this time, I personally felt the importance of family in once life we came to know actual importance of once family. I also came to know that it is really important for one to have another source of income you cannot just depend on one source of income" **P11.**

Which management function/department got the most impact?

It emerges from the data collected from respondents that controlling and organizing functions of management were significantly impacted during the COVID-19 pandemic, although their degree of impact varied across various organizations. The controlling function involves monitoring and evaluating organizational performance to ensure that goals are being achieved and corrective actions are taken when necessary. During the pandemic, the controlling function became significant as organizations had to operate through rapidly changing circumstances and were required to make timely adjustments to their operations. Key aspects of controlling that were impacted included financial control, performance measurement, risk management. The organizing function involves structuring and arranging resources as well as activities within the organization to achieve objectives efficiently. The pandemic had several implications for organizing, which included remote work and virtual teams, staffing and workforce planning, restructuring and adaption. Effective controlling and organizing played a vital role in ensuring financial stability, managing risks, maintaining performance, and facilitating the necessary organizational changes to navigate through the crisis successfully.

Also, it emerged that within an organisation, the sales and operations departments faced significant impacts during the pandemic due to disruptions in demand, changes in sales channels, supply chain challenges, workforce safety considerations, and the need to adapt to

remote work environments. Organizations that successfully managed these challenges by adopting innovative strategies and effectively collaborating across functions were better positioned to navigate the crisis and emerge stronger.

"*In my experience I think the sales department has the most impact*" **P1.**

"*I think most of the department which are mostly impacted which are airlines automobile energy saving and energy equipment services hostel and restaurants and villagers these departments are mostly impacted and cinemas hall. it was malls and entertainment industry were collapsed due to covid-19*" **P2.**

"*I think hospitality huh... tourism you can say these are few sectors which were worried which were worst effected by covid-19. and then people were not going to the hotels were not staying there and so these are the few sectors which are badly affected*"**P3.**

"*It impacted all department in organisation, but most adverse impact was our inspection department*"**P4.**

"*So many employees are not coming in the organization and because of that my Coordination between the employees is also impacted I guess the department is not Impact but the working structure of the employees is impacted during that time No one is attending the meeting, so I guess the sales department in my company is Impacted very badly during that time*" **P5.**

"*Our Security, Transport and IT Department got the most impacted but the work which was done by our Operations team was also impacted basically everyone was impacted at that time*" **P6.**

"*There are various scenarios like, to connect with the employees one to one, that was very difficult due to covid. No one can come to the office, so we need to call one by one*" **P7.**

"*I would say mostly those places which had so many people out there working for them the entire day, they used to deal manually with deadlines, they used to go on the field trips those all professions got very much impacted*" **P8.**

"*The impact was most on sales department because people are not predicting to meet at that time and there were no personal contacts so actually there is only one options available at that time to make a call to the customers. Department was shut down, company was not working, labour migrated so it's not about the sales but various department got affected at that time so I cannot quantify particularly that this department got impacted most but actually the impact was almost in all department across the industry*" **P9.**

"*So according to me the most impacted operation is the basically the tickets which we raise in the companies the support system it got impacted because they have to work from the office itself in pandemic they are allowed to go to offices*" **P10.**

"*I think the travel industry because everyone was asked to quarantine themselves so definitely the travel agencies were hugely impacted apart from that I think the people who had a travel job and they were impacted a lot and you see the restaurants and hotels these were the companies which were impacted*" **P11.**

"*Controlling- Monitoring staff performance and progress is so difficult that time Organizing- During covid 19 most participants have to change the way of delegate work during pandemic. Business sector impacted the most export and import is declined due to restrictions customers resorting to budget cuts and so many projects are on hold that time*" **P12.**

Covid-19, the pandemic came without any prior instructions or guidelines. What are the different challenges as a manger that you have faced?

Managers faced multiple challenges during the Covid-19 pandemic as has emerged from the data.

"Work from home policy was something new to all employees so I think YES it was totally different and of course the VIRTUAL set up so you know working in an office we already have a monitor, mouse etc. whatever virtual set up required at home" **P1**.

"Akshita actually we are belong to the sugar industry it is the sugarcane industry and there are 40 thousand farmers attached with our industry not only 40 thousand farmers but also 22 thousand employees are working there and when the covid first when the covid-19 introduced to the world our season was running on and in that situation we cannot stop the manufacturing of sugarcane because sugarcane crop cannot be sold therefore running the industry in covid-19 was a big challenge for the management and first season was not a very much typical and second wave of the covid-19 separated many colleagues from us, and many colleagues collapse their lives May god rest their soul in peace" **P2**.

"Challenge in front of us was how to get the work done when people can't come to office. second thing we had to provide people infrastructure so that they can work from home... then getting the work done" **P3**.

"When the government announced lockdown. on that day we were managed to deliver the ongoing project on time. But I would like to thank my team who worked continuously for 24 hours a day before lockdown to achieved to goal" **P4**.

"I face so many situations like during that time I am the only person who daily goes to the office and attend the meetings with my boss and other foreign clients during that time and also doing overtime during that time and the second thing is that we face communication issue with our employees the habits they adopt during that time is not good for the organization and me and my organization is the one person if we Talk about work or archiving target" **P5**.

"Everything changed for us we shifted from offline to online and we have to manage our employees and their training online" **P6**.

"There were lots of challenges with the employees to communicate with them to work. So we need to decide video conferencing call to manage our progress report" **P7**.

"We told the people what to do, what not to do, we were learning mostly through social media only, what the influencers were saying, what the people were saying, what speakers were saying, we got the points we had the flow in meetings, we told everyone we made the rules out there, at the doorways we kept masks, at the doorways we kept the sanitizers and that is what we could do at max at that time. So those were 2-3 learnings, do whatever you want to do but do not get into contact with people" **P8**.

"There was incidence when a guy came an there was a lockdown no I told him to go back to home and there was no any cars and taxi so he walk almost 25-30 km to go home back to that kind of lot of incidence happen" **P9**.

"The network issue was the biggest challenge we faced. And like Communication to employees from which platform is also difficult we have WhatsApp, and we have calls but like we are new to introduce to teams by skype and everything" **P10**.

"Work from home but then handling the team from home remotely was a challenging thing and you know it's really difficult when you are trying to contact one of your employees and there are some background noises of the family members" **P11**.

"Keeping up with legislation- because the business landscape is changing at a rapid pace. It seems like the government releases new regulations that affect business owners almost every day. second problem is there is non-availability of many resources during pandemic" **P12**.

Which Skills According to You Played An Important Role During this Pandemic? What Was Major Concern During the Pandemic? What Strategies Did You Develop to Overcome these Concerns?

The most important skill set which assisted the managers to effectively manage their respective businesses and meet the challenges successfully, during Covid-19 are teamwork, leadership, collaboration and digital proficiency, flexibility, and adaptability, organizing of work, communication, and time management.

"*I think teamwork, leadership is very important, collaboration and digital proficiency*" **P1**.

"*All the sections of our society including businesses and employees must play a role if we are to stop the spread of this type of disease so I think that every person should play important role to mainly the WHO which help public health authorities around the world are taking action to control the covid-19 outplay*" **P2**.

"*I would say the skill to interact with each other I mean to have a better team bonding I mean it really helped us, it really gets the work going and yah it helped us the most I mean it was the biggest challenge of us to so that people communicate with each other so when they were not actually in the office they were not actually at the same place*" **P3**.

"*Knowledge and experienced of a person played an important role during this pandemic because if a person doesn't have enough experience or knowledge, he won't be able to work from home*" **P4**.

"*Technology. Because if we were not used to technology, we wouldn't have been survived well during coved times*" **P5**.

"*So, those who are not having any computer skills are totally useless at that time I can say that computer skills are the most useful at that time*" **P6**.

"*Verbal skill, listening skill, time management, negotiation. those are key skills for every manager*" **P7**.

"*I would say discipline. People, in my last question I said that were taking it very seriously but when second wave came up, and there was this whole lockdown... bunch of the whole lockdown. After that when people came up in their normal lives, they are much more disciplined. They take their health seriously, they take even the Chronic very seriously, they are going to the doctors, they are taking the prescriptions, they are not going just to the random chemist and taking the medicine*" **P8**.

"*Interpersonal skills how to you communicate with the customer how do you make them understand and how you approach the people and how you persuade the people to get the business and to get the work done so interpersonal skills was actually played a very important role during this pandemic*" **P9**.

"*According to this the quick learning was the thing which is the we have learned the skills and even the communication was getting better due to this COVID -19*" **P10**.

"*So having that basic technical knowledge of IT that played a very important role I do not say that you know the doctors and the frontline engineers and front-line servicemen they were all appreciated because they even gave their hundred percent during covid*" **P11**.

"*1. Organizing and prioritizing the work; 2. flexibility and adaptability*" **P12**.

What Was Major Concern During The Pandemic? What Strategies Did You Develop to Overcome These Concerns?

Major concerns for managers, during Covid-19, that emerged from the data are well-being (including physical & mental health), communication at all levels and building trust as well interpersonal bonds and remote working.

Well-being (Including Physical & Mental health)

To address the issues related to well-being some of the effective strategies adopted were regular communication on health and safety, providing resources and support, promoting work-life balance and flexible work arrangements. Managers consistently communicated updates and information about health and safety measures in the workplace, such as sanitization protocols, social distancing guidelines, and mask-wearing requirements. This helped alleviate concerns and ensured employees felt informed and protected. They shared information about mental health resources, such as EAPs, counselling services, and online wellness programs. They also encouraged employees to take breaks, practice self-care, and offered flexibility to accommodate personal circumstances. They also encouraged employees to establish boundaries between work and personal life, emphasizing the importance of taking breaks, disconnecting from work after working hours, and maintaining a healthy work-life balance. Flexible work arrangements were implemented, such as remote work or flexible schedules, to support employees in managing their physical and mental well-being. They recognized individual circumstances and provided necessary accommodations.

"*So, I think that was anxiety and depression. So basically, I tried to be, you know continuous touch with my team member about any type of requirement or you know about the health issues*" **P1**

"*The major concern was to save the life of our employees and their families members What strategies did you develop to overcome these concerns? our company develop many hospital mini hospital sorry which were having oxygen beds concentrator oxygen oximeter and many life supporting health equipment at our working sugar units we had not only provided health equipment to our employees but also provided save to the department which are attached with our organization our company denoted two Oxygen plants to the district hospital Amroha and Gonna of UTTAR PRADESH*" **P2**

"*The major concern was the health of the employees and their family. But from the professional aspects I was also worried that how we will manage to move further and how employees will work. If they don't have enough resources to work from home. We motivation our employees to have health insured and we are still reimbursing their insurance amount*" **P4**

"*I think health was the major concern because the pandemic was such that even doctors were not aware about the outcomes or the side effects of the medications they will be provide. They were quite troublesome and managing those were the difficult task. Other thing could have been managed if the health was good*" **P5**

"*The major concern was to save the human capital actually things are not going on right track peoples are so scared also nobody was think about the business ,business was affected very badly at that time so the company was also at that time going through very rough phases so as a professional I have to help my company also protect my team members also the major concern was to keep them save other people save and also to run business*" **P9**

"*Constant communication between the team and the performance check which we have done. And even like asking about their health, their family's health is the thing we have done*" **P10**

Communication at All Levels And Building Trust as Well Interpersonal Bonds

Maintaining effective and transparent communication at all levels and building trust and interpersonal bonds were another set of important concerns for managers during covid-19. These concerns were dealt by having regular team meetings. Managers scheduled regular team meetings to maintain open communication, provide updates, and address any concerns or questions. These meetings ensured that employees felt connected, informed, and had a platform to voice their thoughts. Transparency in communication was ensured by sharing

information about the organization's status, changes, and challenges. It was ensured that employees are kept informed of important decisions and developments through regular email updates, newsletters, or company-wide announcements.

Managers also ensured feedback from employees, who were asked to share their thoughts and concerns directly or through anonymous feedback forms, dedicated email addresses, or virtual suggestion boxes.

Trust building measures to strengthen interpersonal bonds were taken which included seeking feedback and inputs from employees as well as actively listening to their concerns, thereby, valuing their perspectives / contributions and validating their experiences and empathizing with their challenges. Also, employees were empowered by delegating responsibilities, providing some freedom in decision-making, and trusting them to complete tasks. This fostered a sense of ownership and increased trust between managers and employees.

"After this data security second thing we had to be ensure there is a proper work balance when people are working from home, and they are doing their work properly. What strategies did you develop to overcome these concerns? for data security we creating awareness amongst the people we conducting some trainings and we talk to people one by one, one to one and then how they are feeling and how they are managing their work and ... so it was a data security part was mainly handled by training and one to one meetings then secondly for if the work is getting delivered ...and similarly for ensuring a proper work life balance we were talking to the people we were encouraging them to do work dedicatedly when they are working and we wanted them to logoff early ... when their work is done" **P3.**

"Our most important concern was managing the new employees because they are totally a fresher and they don't know how to deal with the pressure and to do work in a professional manner and some employees were saying like my net was not working so basically to manage the employees was the concern" **P6.**

"How to manage the team, how to communicate with the team, and how to develop a trust between manager and employees. The main concern was developing trust between manager and employees. What strategies did you develop to overcome these concerns? For developing trust we have to give personal attention and create personal connections to every employee as a part of developing trust so that employees can work efficiently" **P7.**

"The major concern was to save the human capital; business was affected very badly at that time so the company was also at that time going through very rough phases so as a professional ...the major concern was to keep them save other people save and also to run business so the income becoming to the business and that income be distributed in terms of salary to peoples and other vendors" **P9.**

"Constant communication between the team and the performance check which we have done. And even like asking about their health, their family's health is the thing we have done" **P10.**

"Communication between clients and asking about their health" **P12**

Remote Working

Another significant concern for managers was remote working which was addressed through certain strategies which included having clear meeting schedules and agendas, providing meeting norms / guidelines and resources, creating interactive sessions, encouraging active participation, using video conferencing tools, recording, and sharing meeting summaries and ensuring follow up actions. Regular evaluation and feedback from team members also helped refine these strategies to meet the specific needs of the team.

"*Main concern... Work from Home and handling so many things out there, was that do not get impacted. .... we used to have Friday meetings and we used to be on the calls... Everyone is at their homes you know... without any instructions, without any training programs that how it's going to be at work from home; so it is necessary to tell your employees every single time that recognition is what we know and recognition is what we are aware of, we are recognizing, we are considering the work which you are doing, how much you are doing, but we do recognize and consider your hard work... Retaining has to have the recognition.*" **P8**

"*The major concerns during the pandemic if we say was hiring new employees and making sure that the people who are there in your organisation are able to work properly from work from home. What strategies did you develop to overcome these concerns? We just tried to keep each and every member of our team connected, connected through team's meetings, we made sure that we had one to one meeting apart from that we also had video meetings on weekly basis so that the entire team can meet each other maybe virtually they can spend a 30 minutes conversation over a coffee.*" **P11**

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study highlight the challenges that a crisis such as COVID-19 places on managers in an organization. Lessons learned from other crisis situations such as wars have made it clear that management must be able to adapt to quickly changing circumstances and organizations need to reinvent themselves by creating common awareness, breaking down silos and increasing transparency in order to truly collaborate. The interviews with managers illustrate the complex relationships that arise in such situations between what is espoused as "best practice" in a crisis situation and what is experienced in reality. In the context of the espoused versus the reality of crisis situation, key issues emerge through the data analysis that needs to be carefully considered, in order to learn from such experiences and plan for future situations.

LIMITATIONS

While employing directed content analysis as an analytical approach, there is an inherent disadvantage of overreliance on predetermined theory, which may lead researchers to selectively find evidence supporting the given theory. However, it is important to note that the authors were fully aware of this limitation during the collaborative discussion of the interview analysis results. This concern was actively addressed by conducting an in-depth examination of the findings to ensure a comprehensive and unbiased interpretation. In this study, a total of twelve managers were interviewed to gather insights into their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although this number may be perceived as relatively small, it is crucial to emphasize that the participant count in qualitative research primarily aims to facilitate a fresh and thorough comprehension of the phenomenon being investigated, and this study does that.

Establishing a learning culture is frequently observed as a valuable solution to cope with a fast-changing VUCA environment (Srivastava et al., 2016; Millar et al., 2018; Castillo & Trinh, 2019). Under this dynamic condition, adaptability, which can be acquired through continuous learning, is required for organizations to survive and thrive. Particularly, Vaidya et al., (2020) narrate in their study that a learning culture can equip employees with the capacity to learn better, quicker, and more efficiently. Consequently, this helps transform the organization into a so-called "*adaptive firm*", which is able to move faster in the evolutionary process and have an advantage compared to their competitors in terms of speed and

efficiency in decision making in a VUCA business world. Gandhi (2017) also supports the proposition by stressing that constant learning can facilitate employees with the capability to adapt to a fast-changing market and disruptive environment.

The importance of becoming a learning enterprise for organizations to overcome the VUCA challenge is further explained by Cook (2016). The author argues that the crucial preparation to cope with a fast-changing market is the ability of continuous learning. This capability should materialize both at the generative level (underlying behaviours) and transformational level (fundamental change in mindset) for organizations to maintain their business excellence. Additionally, Srivastava et al., (2016) supports the similar idea of establishing a learning organization with a recommendation of implementing Flexible Capability Development, which serves as a useful, robust framework to leverage employees' learning capability.

A driver for organisational change often occurs from the external environment. For instance, a shift in customer preferences, competitive conduct, or industry developments can impact a firm externally. To capitalise on these changes and turn them into opportunities, companies must first identify and acknowledge them. This capacity or act of recognising heavily relies on an organisation's capabilities, people skills, experience, and expertise (Achoki, 2023). Successfully managing VUCA requires strategic flexibility, robust decision-making processes, strong leadership, and the ability to learn and adapt quickly to new circumstances and make sense of what is going on (Naqvi & Naqvi, 2023).

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic presented significant managerial challenges that required organizations and managers to adapt their practices swiftly. The key insights gained from research studies encompass the importance of crisis management and preparedness, remote work and digital transformation, employee well-being and mental health, as well as effective leadership and communication. By incorporating these insights into their practices, managers can better navigate future crises and ensure the resilience and sustainability of their organizations.

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