

Organization leadership and culture during crisis: lessons and applications learned from COVID-19 pandemic

Organization
leadership and
culture

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Abstract

Purpose – COVID-19 pandemic is a global health emergency which posed new challenges to the organizations to adjust their ways of working by redefining approach to work culture. The objective of this paper is to study as to how COVID-19 has impacted organizational culture which can be sustained with good leadership style. The aim of the paper is to identify and analyze the change in organizational culture and leadership style flexibility adoption required during the pandemic.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper is based on qualitative research that focused on newspaper articles. In the paper, the authors made analysis of newspaper articles on NVIVO software published on culture and leadership from February to December 2021.

Findings – Three main themes that emerged across the study include the change in leadership perspective, organizational perspective and employee perspective to reshape the organizational culture. Companies that support on flexible working hours, work from home and virtual gatherings are likely to attract and retain the most talented employees.

Practical implications – The study gave useful insights to establish well-developed standard operating practices to manage the cultural change. The organizations which reinforce their leadership style to provide psychological support to its employees and amend the policies thereof, can best respond to the potentially damaging effects of COVID-19 to enhance the job satisfaction of its people.

Originality/value – The paper is among the very few studies that examined as how to sustain a good culture in an organization during tough times and how a leader should manage the entire team with the help of qualitative analysis through analysis of newspaper articles. The specific contribution of this paper is to align organizational culture with leadership based on democratic values and standards of legitimacy during tough times so that focus can be made on well-being of employees, strong work ethics and thereby increasing work commitment of the employees.

Keywords Covid-19, Organization culture, Leadership style

Paper type Viewpoint

1. Introduction

The spread of a new coronavirus in Wuhan in December 2019 emerged as a global pandemic in a short span of time (Singh & Kumar, 2020). COVID-19 pandemic is a global health



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emergency which has posed new challenges in the organizations to adjust their ways of working. Pandemics in general are not serious public health concern, rather these trigger disastrous socio-cultural and economic crisis in the infected country (Canterino, Cirella, Piccoli & Shani, 2020). According to a research conducted by Wardman (2020), poor pandemic leadership style of the UK government during pandemic has caused the highest recorded total deaths and among the worst worldwide. The outbreak of COVID-19 is reflecting a sense of disquietude in all industries globally (Gautam, 2020). Its ramifications on society are the need of the time (Meng & Berger, 2019). The outbreak has caused behavioral changes in the employees that are described by fear, uncertainty, pain and a loss of autonomy (von Eiff, von Eiff & Ghanem, 2021). Also, the rapid shift in style of working is causing anxiety to the employees (Gutierrez, 2020). Willingness to solve the problems, striving work culture and demonstrating entrepreneurial skills is the need of hour to achieve level of efficiency in normalizing the work. Maak, Pless and Wohlgezogen (2021) pointed that during the global pandemic crisis leaders have not only failed to instill hope but are also leading the organizations with toxic leadership style destructive for the culture.

Therefore, the present crisis demands the organizations to introduce better policies to motivate and retain the existing employees assuring them with continuous salaries and psychological support (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020). Time also urges the employees to be more supportive and productive fueling themselves to accept the organizational changes in agreement with the guidelines of government (Liu, An, & Ma, 2021). The relevance of this study is based on the pandemic that announced a lot of changes in the work culture leading the emergence of volatility and ambiguity in the business operations (Kaul, Shah & El-Serag, 2020; Atalan, 2020). The job of leader is to be an action oriented on the one hand and work as compass for management on the other (von Eiff *et al.*, 2021). Considering the post pandemic, leadership, organizational structure and corporate culture can be balanced only by actively setting an example of great leader and creating a conducive environment (Namita, 2018; He & Harris, 2020). Organizations need to navigate the management of emerging challenges and the leaders have to develop various problem-solving strategies (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020). To address this gap in literature, it is important to study the impact of these two on the working style of people, culture of the organization and leadership style followed in the current scenario. To this end, the paper reviews the current state of awareness regarding organization work culture norms and organizational leadership style and various suggestions to improvise it.

This study adopted qualitative method of research as they are best to explain organizational behavior, sentiments and emotions (Smollan & Sayers, 2009). Culture and leadership concepts are based on the intelligence, group behavior, ideology and communication style adopted in the organization (Namita, 2018). The first part of the paper presents literature review on organizational culture and leadership style with its changing dimensions due to pandemic. The research methodology is discussed in the second part and lastly data analysis followed by discussions and practical implications are examined in the end section of the paper.

1.1 Theoretical background and literature review

1.1.1 Organizational culture. Organization culture is considered as a main factor to be examined in organizational life (Egitim, 2022), and the researchers questioning its impact on realization of organizational goals has been increasing day by day (Maak *et al.*, 2021). The concept of culture has principally stemmed from the study of ethnic and national differences in the varied disciplines of social sciences (Debata, Patnaik & Mishra, 2020). According to Namita (2018), organizational culture is an important mechanism to channel messages and information that will differentiate between permissible and non-permissible patterns of

behavior through the company's policies, decisions and activities. Although an organization's products, production processes, services, technologies and the other visible properties can be imitated, it is very difficult to emulate the culture of the organization (Albayrak & Albayrak, 2014). The culture of an organization makes employees feel "fit" within a workplace affecting their happiness, motivation and productivity (Braithwaite, Herkes, Ludlow, Testa & Lamprell, 2017; Canterino *et al.*, 2020; Kavita, 2021). The organizational structure, management practices, company's policies and work-life balance of people employed can either strengthen a culture or weaken it if ignored (Choudhury, Larson & Foroughi, 2019; Hickman, 2020). It ponders as to why employees choose to work for a company and what keeps them motivated and comfortable to stay long (Binit, 2017). The precautionary measures suggested by the health authorities for social distancing led a significant change in social, cultural and daily living behaviors (Bavel *et al.*, 2020). According to Debata *et al.* (2020), pandemic has caused the fear of job loss due to technological change, disruption, frustration, isolation, lack of certainty and clarity in individuals, teams and organizations. Within no time "Work from Home" became the new normal considering the well-being of all involved (Chadha, 2020; Bakheet, Javed, Arabia, Bakheet & Keywords, 2021). Adapting the changed scenario has huge impact on the company culture where leadership, employee experience and digital workplace experiences are put to test (Meng & Berger, 2019). The organizations might be technically ready to counter the sudden change, but it is furthermore important to be emotionally and culturally prepared for the new world (Singh & Kumar, 2020). Roytman and Shah (2020) has given the same suggestion that it is not one singular action that facilitate positivity in the pandemic, rather the organizational culture. Thus, it is important to study how the pandemic has impacted the organization culture in times of remote accessibility, workplaces and jobs with the adaptability for change and balanced growth of employees.

1.1.2 Leadership style. Leadership is the ability to inspire individuals to accomplish goals with excellence creating a caring and disciplined environment (Blackwood, 2013). The leader is an individual who directs and coordinates the group activities. The leader's effectiveness could be evaluated from the group's performance for the assigned tasks. Behavioral theories contend that there is no best way of leading an organization and no leadership style is effective in all situations (Fiedler, 1964). The leader should opt for the style of organizational leadership that harmonizes the health situation, the subordinate and the job requirements with the tasks. The need is to train and inspire all subordinates by setting up challenging goals and emphasizing excellence in performance to attain high-quality standards (Sagar & Chauhan, 2021). Leadership can be created by highly skilled leaders possessing social competencies who accept challenges as an opportunity and devise strategies to gain competitive advantage (Talu & Nazarov, 2020). Instruct-style, transformational, autocratic and strategic leadership styles witnessed high level of effectiveness to cope with the exigencies as the leaders were required to assume an autocratic role giving clear instructions to lead their employees (Sagar & Chauhan, 2021). The availability of access to various digital services led to huge economic gains for the technology companies on the one hand and the impoverishment of live performance, closed units and temporarily discharged employees on the other. According to von Eiff *et al.* (2021), the responsibility of leader is not only for the economic success of company but have also to keep in mind the impact of his decisions on the culture and society. Further, if leaders are clear sighted, proactive and respond decisively, the harm and damages can be minimized, and trust can be gained in the minds of employees (Wardman, 2020).

Under these circumstances, effective leadership shines more in rough situations rather in the favorable ones, motivating the people to work harder, having a proper fit with the environment and its subsystems and contributing significantly to the betterment of the organization (Fiedler, 1964).

1.1.3 Relationship between organizational culture and leadership. The relation of organizational culture and leadership is demonstrated by emphasizing the fact that initially the leaders need to respect the cultural elements while framing their organizational strategies and in the later stages it is the cultural values that shape a unique leadership style (Kargas & Varoutas, 2015). Leaders affect change which in turn creates and sustains an organizations culture (Blair, 2003). The role of leader in developing the ethos during pandemic is very challenging. It is the leader who develop healthy organization where all the stakeholders work in an effective way to create a positive organizational culture (Yücel, Karataş & Aydın, 2013). According to Maak *et al.* (2021), the role of leaders is to be guardians of radical hope for future goodness of organizational culture. Also, culture building is in the hands of leaders as recommended by (Kaul *et al.*, 2020) where great leaders engage purposefully with those around them to harness the energy of the broader workforce (Namita, 2018). The successful leaders have the capability to decide what is required immediately and what can be postponed (Meng & Berger, 2019). They do not hesitate to make the hard choices (e.g. work from home, social distancing, hiring freeze and in-person meetings) to address short-term priorities (Kaul *et al.*, 2020). During the crisis, agile leadership will serve the purpose where the leaders decentralize the work and enable others to work acting as facilitators and catalysts thus, promoting the culture of belongingness, empathy, support and teamwork (Canterino *et al.*, 2020; He & Harris, 2020). Similar viewpoint is suggested by Meng and Berger (2019) where organizational culture and leadership performance can foster professionals' work engagement, trust and overall job satisfaction by following the best practices and continual improvement. Wardman (2020) emphasized to put systems, processes, resources and support in a way to mitigate stress and make employees more engaged and productive. Thus, it is vital to focus on how pandemic impacts work culture and what the leaders can do to ensure a positive organizational culture for their employees.

2. Research methodology

This study is based on qualitative research over quantitative method due to three reasons. First, leadership and culture involves multiple levels of phenomena and dynamic character of personalities which by quantitative methods are insufficient to investigate (Smollan & Sayers, 2009). Second, qualitative methods are best to explain organizational behavior, change and emotions (Smollan & Sayers, 2009). Third, quantitative methods measure only static moments of time whereas qualitative research is a flexible mode of communications and is a mass platform to share the sentiments (Zhang, Jansen & Chowdhury, 2011). Following these causes, qualitative research was applied by gathering all the articles published from February to December 2021 in the newspapers like *The Times of India*, *Hindustan Times*, *The Indian Express*, *The Tribune* and *The Hindu*. These newspapers are of Indian origin, circulated in whole of India in English language and are selected to study the development of culture in an organization and the role of a leader in culture building. The sample of the study is selected on the basis *Fortune* list of "100 best companies to work" survey in which none of the companies of Indian origin are listed (Forbes, 2020). All the top selected 100 companies have already adapted new norms of culture and leadership style which is required to be followed by companies of Indian origin. The three perspectives, i.e. employee, organizational and leadership, in the proposed model of study are acknowledged by the employees working in these top 100 companies. The complete analysis was done on NVIVO software which is primarily used for qualitative research on the articles published on organizational culture and Leadership. First, the main themes of the articles have been identified manually and further analyzed was performed using auto coding. Thereafter, word frequency analysis was performed to understand how many times a word is used in the entire sample set of articles. A word of minimum five alphabets has been used to get sensible word cloud.

2.1 Research questions

This paper aims to study the newspaper articles published on culture and leadership (Figure 1). This write-up seeks to answer following questions:

RQ1. How do organizational culture and leadership practices emerge during pandemic?

RQ2. How do leadership style integrate with organizational culture?

3. Data analysis and findings

The challenges posed by pandemic and taking appropriate action can reshape the workplace (Gutierrez, 2020). The word frequency table shown in Table 1 exhibits that maximum articles talk about culture (2.11%), leadership (1.89%), covid (1.17%), employees (1.05%), working (0.80%) and company (0.67%). Figure 2 shows the word frequency analysis of newspaper articles where the repeated words used are working, covid, people, culture, employees and company. Figure 3 shows the result of auto code theme based on the newspaper articles where the discussions are made to understand how an organizational culture can be reshaped. Table 2 exhibit the themes and sub-themes extracted from the newspaper articles on culture and leadership after auto coding in which themes represents the main discussion where sub-themes represent its further categorization.

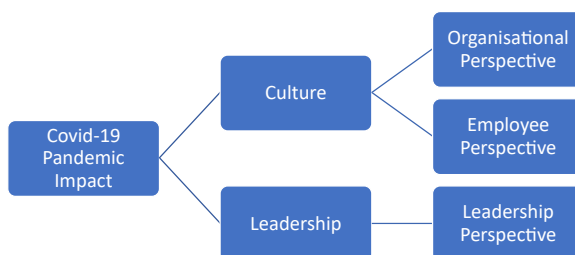


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of the study

Word	Length	Count	Weighted percentage (%)
Culture	7	335	2.11
Leadership	10	290	1.89
Covid	5	186	1.17
Employees	9	167	1.05
Working	7	128	0.80
Company	7	106	0.67
People	6	87	0.55
Business	8	83	0.52
Pandemic	8	75	0.47
Organizational	14	68	0.43
Change	6	40	0.25
Social	6	40	0.25
Workplace	9	40	0.25
Values	6	39	0.25

Source(s): NVIVO word frequency analysis

Table 1. Word frequency analysis

Themes	Sub themes
CULTURE	Organizational culture, workplace culture, healthy organization culture, winning culture, strong company culture, corporate culture, aligning culture, company culture, proactive culture
WORK	Work engagement, work culture, working environment, working spouse, remote working, working conditions, work commitment, productive work, work initiatives, work from home
EMPLOYEE	Employee experience, employee lifecycle process, existing employees, employee engagement, remote employees, furloughed employees
WORKPLACE LEADERSHIP COMMUNICATION	Workplace experience, workplace environment, workplace culture, digital workplace Company culture leadership, leadership style, leadership performance, senior leadership, leadership team, agile leadership
EXPERIENCE	Clear communication, effective communication, workplace communication, digital communication
TECHNOLOGY	Employee experience, workplace experience, digital experience, working experience, poor experience, collegial experience, shared experience, resident experience, authentic experience
ENVIRONMENT TEAM LEADER	Strong technology, pandemic resilient technology, technology infrastructure, technological transformation, technology adoption, technological advantage Workplace environment, home environments, remote environment
CHANGE	Executive teams, team collaboration, physical team environments, leadership team Right leader, strong leader, responsive leader, good leader, business performance leader, senior leader
Source(s):	Significant change, company culture change, changing roles
Authors' construct	

Table 2.
Themes and sub-
themes on culture and
leadership

4. Discussion

Various measures were initiated during COVID-19 for reshaping organizational culture as per the information processed from newspaper articles. The study gave useful insights on the three different outlooks explored from our study based on organizational, employee and leadership perspective for reshaping organization culture and leadership style.

From the organizational perspective (Figure 4), the results indicated that the engagement of employees in virtual workplace poses a challenge and urges the need to have clear communication through team collaborations, assigning time-based targets and fostering enthusiasm by providing performance-based incentives (Namita, 2018; Kavita, 2021). Temporary rules for the suspension of dismissals, provision for the extension of financial support and family leave are required to improve the overall culture of the organization (Kaul et al., 2020; Debata et al., 2020). The practice to hold virtual team meetings, appreciation in online sessions, remote brainstorming, virtual learning and socially responsible initiatives helps in reducing stress and anxiety of the COVID-19-affected families of workforce (Singh & Kumar, 2020; von Eiff et al., 2021). Also, well-developed standard operating practices of organization will manage the crisis in pandemic. Similar recommendations are given by Choudhury et al. (2019) and Hickman (2020).

From the employees' perspective (Figure 5), the results revealed that employees want to work on flexi hours, transparent work policies and performance-based incentives to reduce stress and disorder (Restauri & Sheridan, 2020). Further the leaders can host virtual meetings on the topics, like self-esteem, anger management, healthcare, team building and online family engagement events, to make the employees feel positive while creating the environment of connectivity and understanding in the organization (Braithwaite et al., 2017; Canterino et al., 2020; Kavita, 2021). Further, the results indicated for providing salary in advance, providing loan moratorium, creating special

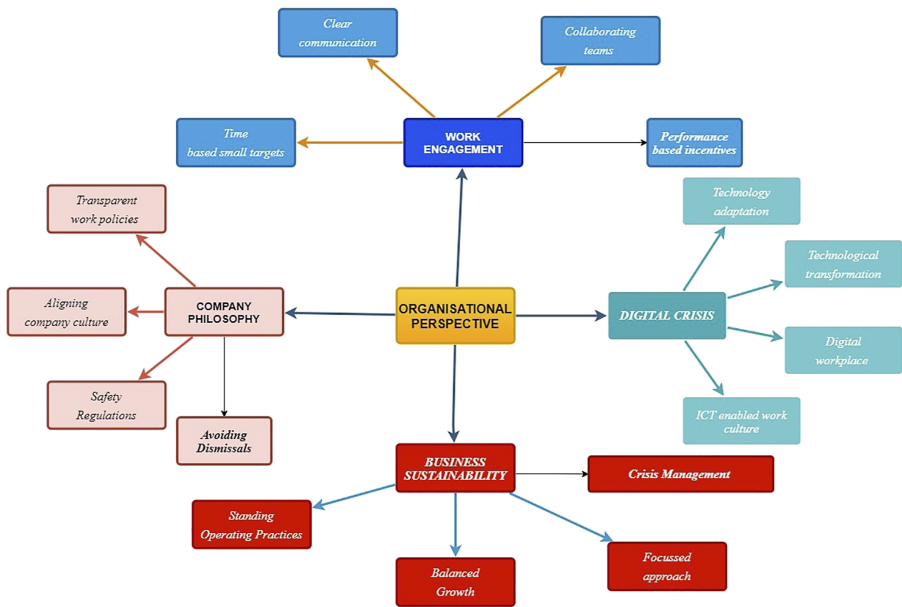


Figure 4.
Organizational
perspective

Source(s): Authors Construct

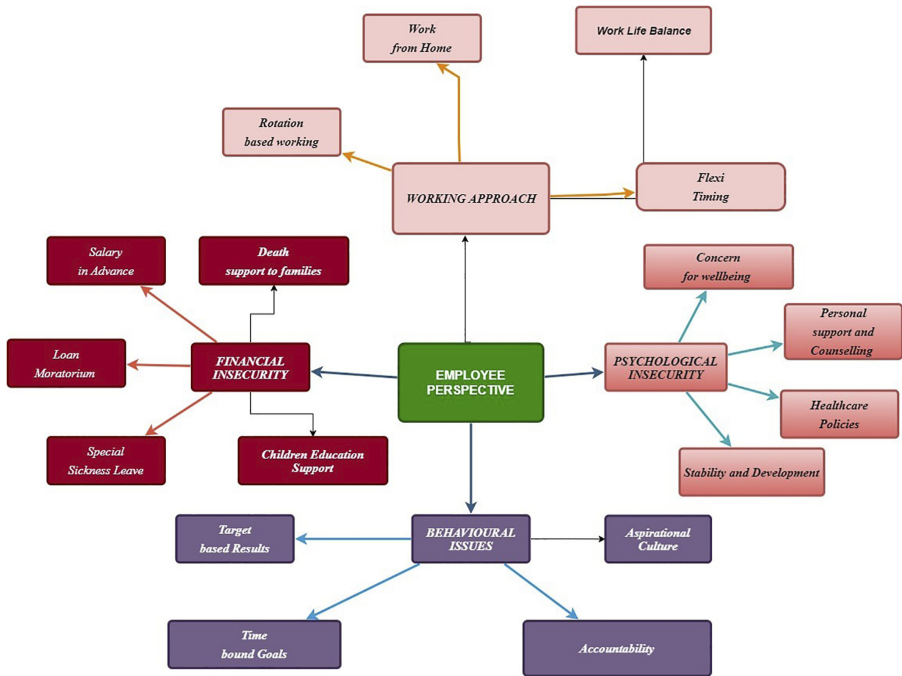


Figure 5.
Employee perspective

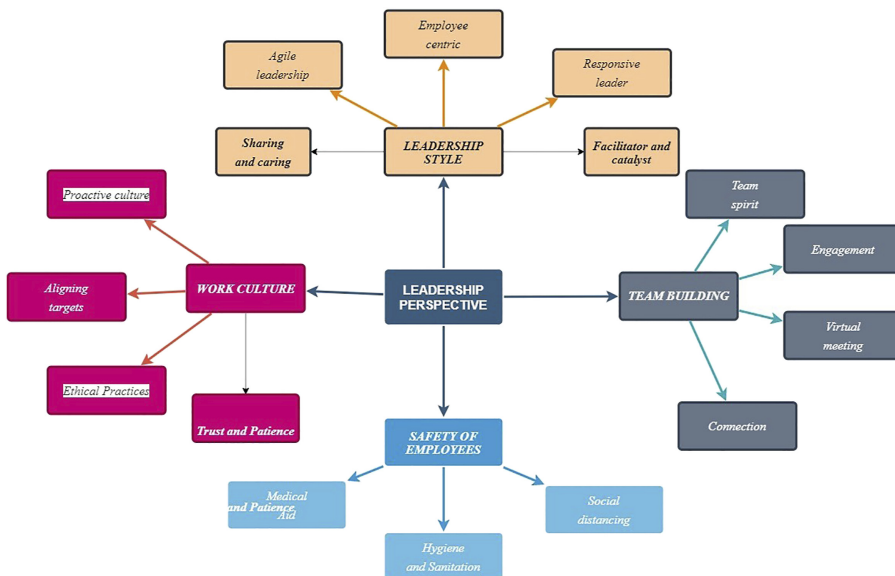
Source(s): Authors Construct

funds to give death support to employee’s family members and children education (Braithwaite *et al.*, 2017; He & Harris, 2020). The study emphasizes on providing psychological support to employees by initiating healthcare policies, social interactions and counselling (Bavel *et al.*, 2020).

From the leadership perspective (Figure 6), the results emerged that the job of a leader is to create an environment where people feel valued, supported and driven to results. The results are in line with Maak *et al.* (2021) where the author also purported with the role of leaders to instill sense of hope for future goodness and dignity. If the leaders are dealing with a combination of remote and onsite workers, then they should leverage digital communication tools, to engage all employees in team activities and goals (Wardman, 2020; Carnevale & Hatak, 2020). All the adjustments and change in work culture is possible only with agile leadership where the focus is on the accomplishment of tasks and targets rather than the place where it is performed (von Eiff *et al.*, 2021; Maak *et al.*, 2021). This viewpoint was suggested and supported by Singh and Kumar (2020) and Restauri and Sheridan (2020). The role of a leader should be as facilitator and catalyst. The similar recommendation was suggested by Wardman (2020) and He and Harris (2020) where clear-sighted and proactive leaders can respond decisively, and least damages of crisis will be borne by the employees and company as whole.

5. Implications for research and practice

The study provides useful insights for various policy implications. First, the study focuses on the transformational style of leadership which needs to be adopted in unforeseen situations (Atalan, 2020). Second, employees can be given small targets and flexible timings as a source of monitoring and motivation (Binit, 2017). Third, organizations can call employees on rotation basis keeping in mind their safety on one hand and maintaining smooth work on the



Source(s): Authors Construct

Figure 6. Leadership perspective

other which will help the employees to maintain work life balance, decrease in sick days, social break time and relaxed work environment. Fourth, employee adjustment is a must where employees in today's dynamic environment be able to leverage some of the characteristics of good leaders for tolerating the uncertainty and proactive in adapting the new norm of work culture (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020). Lastly, the implications of the research can be useful in shaping the minds of employers and employees emphasizing on robust learning, collectively promoted, legitimately supported and always ready for the crisis (Wardman, 2020; Egitim, 2022). The COVID-19 crisis has certainly highlighted the intellectual qualities expected from leaders to mirror environmental complexity, reflective and critical thinking and the ability to evaluate and judge one's decisions in the context of good governing culture.

6. Limitations

The study has certain limitations. First, due to the qualitative nature of this study, the findings are not meant to be generalized to a larger population. That is why cross-cultural contexts have not been studied. The other limitation of the study is that the articles are not analyzed based on positions and job profile of employers and employees; hence, it is possible that some of the articles considered for the study may be biased due to their position. The broad scope of topic poses a challenge, as there were inherent limitations whereby the term *culture* and *leadership* was paradoxically defined or measured in the studies we reviewed and the theories established for same. The heterogeneity of data complicated attempts to draw precise comparisons across studies and conclusions.

7. Conclusion and scope for future research

The COVID-19 pandemic is one of the hardest challenges our race faces in recent times (Egitim, 2022). The pandemic is an exceptional time like none other before, and its effect on employees will be lasting (Liu *et al.*, 2021). Even when the situations improve, it is obligatory for the organizations to be employee-centric and focus on building strong teams to manage work crisis (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020). In this study, an effort has been made to offer some initial thoughts in the blogs and newspaper articles published on pandemic influence on organization culture and leadership. Companies that entered the pandemic with a strong and constructive culture discovered a new resilience (Gavidia, 2020). Building upon this, the way toward future research in the area of cultural and leadership throws light on what could be the probable environment to benefit future organizations (Wardman, 2020). Keeping in mind the future scope of culture and leadership, the study gave useful insights for adoption of digitally based workflows, family-friendly and health-promoting working conditions, stress-resilience through coaching, mentoring, supervision, fair compensation and incentive system (Sagar & Chauhan, 2021). Lastly, the companies need to redefine its culture, leadership models and interaction channels for the sustainable development of organizations. The implications for the practice of leadership should be such where more compassion, less ideology, more open-mindedness and integrative thinking is the changing leadership practice that needs to be followed (Binit, 2017; Maak *et al.*, 2021). Further, curbing narcissism through better analysis of a leader's emotional make-up and nurturing critical followership are two very important initial steps. Leaders should fortify their empathy, kindness and listening skills to support employees in situations of great stress and anxiety. Organizations that can focus on moving in the right direction in the tough times will emerge stronger than before. The companies that do not treat workers with respect during hard times could discover the irretrievable damage to their employer brand and may struggle to recruit the best talent in future.

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