

Executive Leadership Insights: Navigating Crises with Adaptive Management Competencies

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This study investigates the complex university management environment, specifically, universities of technology, seeking to unravel the complicated dynamics that describe changes in management competencies from regular operational periods to times of crisis. The goal is to comprehend how management competencies evolve in response to the unique challenges posed by crises, with a particular emphasis on the impact of the #FeesMustFall student protest and the COVID-19 pandemic. The exploratory research study employs a qualitative methodology that includes semi-structured online interviews conducted through videoconferencing, providing a safe and flexible platform for gathering real-time, audio-visual insights from participants, closely resembling traditional in-person interviews adhering to the strict COVID-19 pandemic requirements and Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) enables a comprehensive exploration of management and crisis competencies. The findings of the study identify six critical changes executives make when a crisis evolves. Ultimately, this study provides a valuable contribution to understanding how university executives evolve and adapt their management competencies during crises, with the unprecedented backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic serving as a critical focal point.

Keywords: management competencies, adaptation, crisis, university, university management

JEL Classification: M10, M12, M19

1. Introduction

Within the South African Higher Education landscape, especially within the Universities of Technology (UoTs) sphere, effective management plays a pivotal role in shaping the trajectory and success of these academic institutions. During normal operating times, management within UoTs typically involves strategic planning, routine administration, and a focus on achieving long-term educational goals. Leaders often emphasize delegation and collaboration to ensure the smooth functioning of day-to-day operations. However, the higher education landscape, particularly in the context of UoTs, is not immune to unforeseen disruptions, ranging from socio-political challenges to global health crises. As such, the adaptability of management competencies becomes imperative, especially in times of crisis. This adaptability involves a shift towards more dynamic, hands-on, and responsive management competencies, emphasizing the ability to make swift

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decisions and navigate uncertainties. This introductory paragraph sets the stage for exploring how management at UoTs in South Africa needs to evolve and adapt to effectively address the unique challenges posed by crises.

Hall (2015) indicated that the restructuring of the Higher Education sector was approved by the South African government on 21 June 2002 via Government Gazette Vol 444, No 23549. Its implementation led to the creation of 11 new higher education institutions emerging from 26 merger allies; this affected 62 % of current student registrations in the South African higher education system.

Universities of Technology (UoTs) play an essential role within the higher education landscape in South Africa, holding a distinctive position that aligns with the nation's developmental imperatives. Renowned for their emphasis on practical and applied knowledge, UoTs bridge the gap between academic theory and real-world application, fostering a dynamic learning environment that nurtures skilled professionals for the nation's workforce. The importance of effective leadership in UoTs cannot be overstated, as these institutions are tasked with navigating complex challenges, technological advancements, and societal changes. A forward-looking and adaptive leadership approach is imperative to guide UoTs in fulfilling their mandate of producing graduates who are not only academically proficient but also equipped with the practical skills demanded by the evolving landscape of industry and innovation. In essence, effective leadership is foundational to ensuring that Universities of Technology continue to serve as catalysts for socio-economic development, knowledge dissemination, and the advancement of South Africa's competitiveness on both regional and global fronts. The article investigates how management competencies in South African UoTs evolve in response to crises. Focusing on the #FeesMustFall movement and the COVID-19 pandemic, the study aims to identify critical changes in leadership approaches during such periods. The study reveals six key themes that highlight the necessity of adaptability, rapid decision-making, enhanced communication, and personal involvement in crisis management. This research is relevant as it provides valuable insight into how educational leaders can effectively navigate crises, ensuring the resilience and continued success of UTs during turbulent times.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Crisis?

Paraskevas (2006) explored the historical roots of the term "crisis," deriving from the early Greek word "Krisis," which conveys a moment of critical choice, decision-making, or judgment. This linguistic foundation underscores the pivotal nature of crises in decision-making processes. Reflecting this notion, The Cambridge English Dictionary (The Cambridge English Dictionary, 2024) defines a crisis as "*an extremely dangerous or difficult situation*," highlighting its potential to lead to critical junctures with profound implications. The dictionary further elucidates it as "an exceptionally difficult or perilous point within a situation," highlighting the severity and urgency often associated with crises.

The concept of a crisis has been subject to continuous exploration and refinement by scholars over the years. Through interdisciplinary perspectives and empirical investigations, researchers continue to deepen our understanding of crises and their implications for decision-making, communication, and organizational resilience.

Pearson and Clair (2008) conceptualize a crisis as a low-probability, high-impact event that jeopardizes the viability of an organization, marked by ambiguity in causality, effects, and resolution means, coupled with the necessity for rapid decision-making. Coombs (2014) aligns with this perspective, framing a crisis as a perception of an unpredictable event threatening stakeholders' expectancies related to health, safety, environmental, and economic issues, with potential adverse impacts on organizational performance.

Bundy, *et al.*, (2017) identified four primary characteristics of a crisis: it serves as a source of uncertainty, disruption, and change; poses harm or threats to organizations and stakeholders, often with conflicting needs; is socially constructed by involved actors; and is part of larger processes rather than isolated events. In examining organizational crises, scholars have articulated nuanced definitions over decades. Milburn *et al.*, (1983) define organizational crisis as both an obstacle to goal attainment and an opportunity for goal achievement, characterized by uncertainty in resolution strategies. Mitroff, *et al.*, (1987) emphasize the multifaceted nature of crises, attributing them to various triggers within and outside the organization, causing widespread harm to natural and social environments.

In fusing these perspectives, the study adopts the holistic definition proposed by Milburn et al., (1983), encapsulating organizational crisis as an event that impedes goal attainment, demands swift resolution under uncertainty, and potentially offers opportunities for organizational advancement.

2.2. Management competencies

Management competencies are foundational elements for organizational success, playing a crucial role in both normal operating times and times of crises. These competencies encompass a wide range of skills, knowledge, and behaviors essential for effective leadership and management. During normal operating times, management competencies are fundamental for maintaining productivity, fostering innovation, and adapting to market changes. Effective communication, strategic thinking, and decision-making skills align organizational efforts with objectives and facilitate growth. Moreover, competencies such as team building, emotional intelligence, and ethical leadership contribute to a positive work culture, enhancing employee engagement and overall performance.

However, the significance of management competencies becomes even more noticeable during crises. Managers must demonstrate heightened adaptability, resilience, and agility to navigate uncertainties and lead their teams effectively through turbulent times. Strong communication becomes essential for providing clarity and direction amidst ambiguity, while strategic thinking is crucial for identifying emerging threats and opportunities. Additionally, competencies such as crisis management, change management, and stakeholder engagement are vital for guiding organizations through challenges while maintaining stakeholder trust.

The importance of these competencies is evident in the diverse definitions provided by scholars. Yarmohammadian *et al.* (2013) emphasize the role of management in organizational success, highlighting the dependence on managers' competency, skill, and effectiveness. Similarly, Kantanen, Kaunonen, and Helminen (2017) stress the importance of leadership and management competencies for success in society. Tarwirei (2015) defines skills, knowledge, and experience within the context of management competencies, emphasizing their role in effective task execution. These competencies are further categorized by Lakshminarayanan, Pai, and Ramaprasad (2016) into analytical skills, self-management, relationship management, self-awareness, goal and action management, and social awareness, each requiring specific actions for effectiveness.

Different levels of management require distinct competencies, as highlighted by Oleksyn (2006). Top management, responsible for strategic decisions, must possess competencies conducive to shaping the organization's future and fostering sustainable development. Hellriegel *et al.* (2012) identify six key managerial competency categories vital for effective management, emphasizing their transferability across organizations. The authors stress the importance of acquiring these competencies through formal studies, extracurricular activities, and experience.

Abraham *et al.* (2001) further underline the criticality of management competencies, identifying twenty important competencies essential for managerial success. The evolution of research on managerial competencies highlights their complexity and importance in organizational contexts, with overlapping competencies identified by various scholars. In conclusion, management competencies are indispensable for organizational success, particularly during times of crisis when adaptability and resilience are paramount. Effective managers must continuously develop and refine these competencies to navigate challenges and drive organizational performance.

3. Research Methodology

The study is grounded in an exploratory research design.

3.1. Research Approach

The study is grounded in an exploratory research design, primarily focused on a qualitative research methodology. As supported by scholars such as Saunders and Lewis (2018), Marshall and Rossman (2006), and Cavana *et al.* (2001), exploratory research serves the purpose of shedding light on and probing previously unexplored phenomena, enhancing our comprehension of the prevailing issues. It aims to provide in-depth, rich data and descriptions, occasionally delving into unresolved problems to propose potential solutions and identify avenues for future research (Phillips and Pugh, 2000).

Qualitative research, particularly exploratory studies, is well-suited for methodologies such as semi- and unstructured interviews or unstructured observation (Saunders and Lewis, 2018). The study's focal point is executive management members of South African Universities of Technology (UoTs), emphasizing the practicality of conducting the research within the South African tertiary sector, given its specific focus on UoTs and crisis management competencies.

3.2 Sample frame and sampling

In addition to methodological considerations, the study addresses the details of sample framing and selection. A sample frame, defined as a list of all members of a population from which a sample may be drawn (Matthews & Ross, 2010; DiGaetano, 2013), is constructed from the executive management members of UoTs within South Africa. The exclusion of second-tier management members, such as deans of faculties and strategic business unit directors, is contingent upon their official mandate by the executive management committees of individual UoTs, as dictated by university statutes.

Purposive sampling, a common non-probability technique, is chosen for its efficiency in qualitative research with a limited sample size (Saunders & Lewis, 2018; Matthews & Ross, 2010). Participants are selected based on specific criteria, considering their expertise or knowledge (Etikan & Bala, 2017). The population for the study includes executive management members from universities of technology in South Africa which include, Vice-Chancellors, Deputy Vice-Chancellors, Registrars, Executive Directors, and Executive Deans of Faculties. The target population of 68 executive management members was refined to 53 from five participating UoTs, due to acknowledging permissions, availability, and logistical challenges.

3.3 Data collection and data analysis

The study employs semi-structured online interviews, a prevalent qualitative method, guided by prepared questions and broad themes (Saunders & Lewis, 2018; Qu & Dumay, 2011). Due to COVID-19 restrictions, online videoconferencing was chosen for safety, overcoming geographical barriers, and enhancing flexibility (Irani, 2019; Salmons, 2012). The choice of semi-structured online interviews was made considering the practicality and effectiveness of qualitative data collection, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic (Irani, 2019; Salmons, 2012). Videoconferencing offers real-time, audio-visual communication, closely resembling in-person interviews (Irani, 2019; Tuttas, 2015). The flexibility, accessibility, and familiarity of this method contribute to its popularity in qualitative research (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Salmons, 2012; Tuttas, 2015).

The study adopts Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) as the research method, drawing insights from various scholars to support its appropriateness. According to Bengtsson (2016), QCA involves recognizing and clustering categories in text, specifically verbatim transcripts, to achieve a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. Hsieh and Shannon (2005) emphasize the flexibility of Content Analysis in analyzing text data. Krippendorff (2004) defines QCA as a technique enabling replicable inferences and effective analysis of texts, aiming to define and quantify phenomena. White and Marsh (2006) stress that QCA produces a contextualized picture of a specific phenomenon rather than an objective account of reality. The sources of data, as noted by Kondracki and Wellman (2002), can vary from verbal to electronic forms obtained through various means like interviews or historical answers.

The suitability of Content Analysis for this study is justified by its capacity to describe the researched phenomenon, i.e., important management and crisis management competencies (Elo and Kyngäs, 2008). Furthermore, Content Analysis facilitates the reporting of common threads in the data, involving categories and sub-categories (Vaismoradi *et al.*, 2013). The study follows a three-phased process (preparation, organization, and reporting) outlined by Vaismoradi *et al.* (2013). In the preparation phase, the researcher repeatedly reads transcripts to gain familiarity and identifies salient concepts and patterns. Iterative reading, coupled with interviews, contributes to a comprehensive understanding. The organizing phase involves grouping codes under emerging categories and sub-categories until data saturation is reached. In the reporting phase, the researcher qualitatively describes categories and sub-categories, aligning with the research questions. This approach ensures conceptual depth and a comprehensive depiction of the studied phenomena,

as recommended by White and Marsh (2006). The study's rigorous approach, grounded in QCA and following a systematic three-phased process, contributes to the robustness and validity of the research methodology.

3.4 Trustworthiness of Qualitative Research

Guba and Lincoln's (1994) statement regarding the significance of trustworthiness in evaluating qualitative research underscores a fundamental aspect of maintaining the integrity and reliability of research findings. Trustworthiness serves as a cornerstone for establishing the credibility and validity of qualitative studies, ensuring that the results are dependable and meaningful.

Guba and Lincoln (1994) indicated that trustworthiness in qualitative research comprises four key aspects which are:

3.4.1 Credibility: This refers to ensuring the research study adheres to established good practices and involves respondent validation to confirm the accurate understanding of the participants' social world. Techniques such as spending extensive time with respondents, using verbatim responses, and employing triangulation strengthen the credibility of qualitative research.

3.4.2. Transferability: Also known as external validity in qualitative research, transferability concerns the extent to which research findings can be applied to different contexts or topics. Providing detailed descriptions of the studied population aids in establishing transferability.

3.4.3. Dependability: Dependability emphasizes the transparency and reliability of the research process, allowing readers to trace the decision-making trail used by the researcher. Documenting every step of the research process, including participant selection, data collection, analysis, and interpretation, ensures dependability.

3.4.4. Confirmability: Confirmability ensures that research findings are derived solely from the collected data and not influenced by individual values or biases. This is achieved by meticulously documenting the data collection and analysis process and maintaining a mindful, impartial approach throughout the study.

This study applied the four criteria holistically throughout the study.

4. Analysis and Results

To establish how management adapts their management competencies within a crisis, the executive management members were asked: "In times of crises, how do you change your pattern/manner of management to adapt to the crisis?" After analyzing the responses provided by the executive management members regarding how managers change their management style during crises, several common themes emerge. These themes are discussed below:

4.1. Theme 1: Urgency and Speed of Decision-Making:

During periods of crisis, urgency becomes paramount as highlighted by respondents who stress the necessity for swift decision-making. In such circumstances, there's a consensus that the pace of action must accelerate significantly compared to normal operations. This sentiment underscores the criticality of timely responses, where every moment counts towards addressing the evolving situation effectively. Respondents indicated that "during times of crises you need to get things done quicker than before" which encapsulates the heightened pressure to expedite processes and actions to navigate through challenges. It reflects a mindset shift where agility and responsiveness are elevated to top priorities, recognizing that delays could exacerbate the impact of the crisis. Moreover, the assertion that "during a crisis, time and speed are of the essence" underscores the fundamental understanding that time is a precious commodity that cannot be squandered. The urgency embedded in this statement emphasizes the need for immediate action to contain the crisis, minimize disruptions, and safeguard organizational interests. Current literature, as highlighted by Pearson & Mitroff (2019), reinforces the significance of rapid decision-making in crisis management. It emphasizes that the ability to make quick, well-informed decisions is pivotal not only for mitigating risks but also for enhancing

organizational resilience. In rapidly changing and uncertain environments, the agility to adapt and execute decisions swiftly can make the difference between survival and succumbing to the crisis's consequences.

4.2. Theme 2: Flexibility and Adaptability:

Managers recognize the indispensable role of flexibility and adaptability when confronted with crises, as highlighted by their emphasis on adjusting their management approach according to the situation at hand. The sentiment expressed by a respondent, elucidating that under normal circumstances, operations are typically guided by routine day-to-day activities and planned meetings, starkly contrasts with the dynamic nature of crisis management. In times of crisis, the respondent suggests, all efforts and resources must be swiftly redirected and concentrated on addressing the emergent challenges, underscoring the imperative of adaptability and responsiveness. This adaptation to changing priorities and circumstances underscores the essence of flexibility in management practices during crises. It entails a departure from conventional modes of operation and a readiness to pivot strategies, reallocate resources, and reprioritize objectives to effectively contend with the crisis's demands. Such adaptability enables managers to navigate uncertainty, rapidly evolving situations, and unforeseen obstacles with agility and resilience. Pettigrew *et al.* (2015), underscore the significance of organizational agility in responding to unexpected disruptions. Organizational agility encompasses the ability to swiftly detect and respond to changes in the external environment, reconfigure structures and processes as needed, and capitalize on emerging opportunities or mitigate threats efficiently. In the context of crisis management, this agility becomes paramount, as it enables organizations to mobilize swiftly, make informed decisions, and implement timely interventions to mitigate the impact of the crisis.

4.3. Theme 3: Enhanced Communication and Engagement:

During crises, effective communication emerges as a cornerstone of successful crisis management. The significance of communication is underscored by a respondent's emphasis on its importance, as indicated by the statement, "Meetings will be focused on the crisis and how to solve the crisis." This highlights a strategic shift in communication priorities, where discussions are streamlined to address the immediate challenges posed by the crisis, facilitating swift decision-making, and coordinated action. Moreover, the assertion that "communication is important... during any negotiations" emphasizes the broader applicability of effective communication beyond crisis response. It underscores the pivotal role of communication in various aspects of organizational functioning, including negotiations, where clear and transparent communication can facilitate consensus-building, mitigate misunderstandings, and foster mutually beneficial outcomes. Frandsen & Johansen (2018) reinforce the critical role of communication in crisis management. The study emphasizes the importance of timely and transparent communication in maintaining stakeholder trust, managing perceptions, and mitigating the impact of crises on organizational reputation. Furthermore, the advent of digital platforms has revolutionized communication practices during crises, enabling organizations to disseminate information rapidly, engage with stakeholders in real-time, and coordinate response efforts more effectively.

4.4. Theme 4: Increased Personal Involvement:

Respondents reveal a deepened sense of personal commitment and involvement when confronted with crises, as evidenced by their declarations of taking a frontline leadership role and eschewing delegation in favor of a hands-on approach. The statement "Me, as a leader, you need to lead from the front" encapsulates a proactive leadership style characterized by direct involvement and visible leadership presence during turbulent times. Similarly, the assertion "I won't delegate" underscores a personal commitment to taking direct responsibility for critical decisions and actions, signaling a departure from conventional delegation practices in favor of maintaining tight control and oversight. This heightened level of personal involvement during crises aligns with findings from studies by Kaul, Makunga, and Moodley. (2020), which emphasize the unique challenges posed by volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environments. In such contexts, rapid, high-impact decisions are necessitated despite limited information availability, requiring leaders to navigate through uncertainty while safeguarding the interests of their organization and stakeholders. Leaders are compelled to confront these challenges head-on, proactively managing the elements of volatility,

uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity while simultaneously learning from experience and devising innovative problem-solving strategies.

4.5. Theme 5: Utilization of Experience and Problem-Solving Skills:

Managers underscore the significance of drawing upon their accumulated experience and honed problem-solving skills as indispensable assets when navigating crises. This emphasis on leveraging past experiences to inform present decision-making is exemplified by respondents' direct statements, such as "I have found that I can connect the dots very quickly and find solutions." This assertion reflects a recognition of the value of experiential knowledge in rapidly identifying patterns, discerning underlying issues, and formulating effective solutions to emergent challenges. Moreover, the acknowledgment that "Your management style has to change... your decision-making and your response to the crisis" underscores the necessity for adaptability and flexibility in leadership approaches during times of crisis. This recognition suggests a departure from rigid managerial frameworks towards a more agile and responsive stance that is attuned to the unique demands and uncertainties of crises. It implies a willingness to pivot strategies, reassess priorities, and recalibrate management practices to align with the evolving needs and dynamics of the crisis environment.

Uhl-Bien and Arena (2018), indicate that organizational leadership faces numerous challenges to become adaptable in complex environments. The study underscores the importance of organizational resilience, which hinges upon the ability to learn from past experiences, rapidly iterate on strategies, and effectively respond to disruptions. In crisis scenarios, the capacity to draw upon accumulated knowledge, innovate in real-time, and navigate through uncertainty becomes indispensable for organizational survival and success.

4.6. Theme 6: Maintaining Goal Alignment and Focus:

Despite facing disruptions, managers stress the critical importance of maintaining alignment with organizational goals and sustaining focus amidst uncertainty. This commitment to strategic clarity is exemplified by a respondent's assertion that "my team can deliver by adapting to the crisis," underscoring the resilience and adaptability necessary to stay on course even in the face of unexpected challenges. The ability to maintain goal alignment and focus during crises requires a delicate balance between addressing urgent needs and staying true to strategic priorities. Successful leaders recognize the importance of allocating short-term resources judiciously to address pressing concerns while ensuring that these actions remain aligned with the overarching strategic vision of the organization. This approach enables organizations to weather the storm of uncertainty without losing sight of their long-term aspirations and objectives. As Kaul, Shah and El-Serag, (2020) suggests, effective leadership during crises entails the ability to navigate complexity, communicate effectively, and make decisive decisions in a rapidly evolving environment. By embracing adaptability, fostering open communication channels, and taking decisive action, managers can steer their organizations through turbulent times and emerge stronger on the other side.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

5.1 Managerial Contribution

The primary aim of this study was to examine how executive management members adjust their management competencies to navigate crises. The themes unearthed in this research shed light on the strategies employed by management members, drawing from their experiences, to facilitate the adaptation of executive management teams from routine operations to crises. These strategies are crucial for informing future training programs aimed at executive management in higher education institutions, especially considering their vulnerability to crises. Adequate training programs and development initiatives for executive management are crucial for equipping executive management members with the necessary competencies to effectively handle crises. Moreover, such initiatives aid in succession planning by identifying key management and crisis management competencies required for executive positions within management teams. The additional managerial implications from this study suggest that crisis management training for executive teams should

not only focus on specific competencies but also on the development of a broader capacity for agility, rapid decision-making, and maintaining strategic alignment under pressure. This preparation can help higher education institutions better navigate crises, minimize disruptions, and emerge stronger.

5.2 Limitations of study / Future directions of research

One significant limitation of this study is its focus was solely on universities of technology within South Africa and the study could not employ traditional and comprehensive universities within the study. Consequently, the findings may not apply to all public universities within South Africa. The unique operational structures, resources, and organizational cultures of traditional and comprehensive universities may result in different crisis management practices that were not explored in this study. Furthermore, the study was geographically restricted to South Africa which limits the applicability of the findings to higher education institutions in other countries or regions, especially with different educational frameworks, governance structures, and levels of resource availability. Future directions of research could include the broadening of the scope to all university types and all countries which could lead to the development of more generalized crisis management strategies or contribute to a global framework for crisis management in higher education.

5.3 Conclusion

During times of crisis, organizations confront heightened pressures and uncertainties, demanding a strategic emphasis on urgency, flexibility, and transparent communication to proficiently tackle challenges while remaining aligned with strategic objectives. The need for swift decision-making is unmistakable, recognizing the necessity to expedite processes and actions amid rapidly changing circumstances. Managers assume a critical role in this context, necessitating them to adjust their management methods, pivot strategies, and uphold a proactive leadership style to effectively guide through the dynamic landscape of crisis management. Relying on past experiences, refined problem-solving abilities, and organizational agility becomes indispensable for arranging an efficient crisis response. These resources enable organizations to promptly recognize patterns, unearth underlying issues, and devise solutions to emergent challenges. Additionally, maintaining focus on long-term goals while addressing immediate needs is essential for nurturing resilience and preserving strategic clarity amidst uncertainty. Embracing adaptability, fostering transparent communication channels, and ensuring alignment with organizational objectives serve as fundamental principles for navigating crises successfully. By prioritizing these aspects, organizations can effectively navigate crises, emerging from difficulty stronger, more resilient, and better prepared to confront future crises.

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