# The Evolution of Leadership Practices During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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## INTRODUCTION

The catastrophic emergence of COVID-19 and its disruptive impact on all aspects of our personal and professional lives is without precedent in modern times. The disruption has forced leaders into the spotlight as they've had to navigate their organizations into an uncertain future, while addressing employees' increased needs for support and guidance during these difficult times.

### Purpose of Study
The current study seeks to understand how leaders have reacted to the pandemic, in terms of the key leadership practices that are being demonstrated more or less frequently as compared to the pre-COVID environment. Additionally, we sought to explore how these results compare to what is typically seen from leaders during times of crisis.

### Research Questions
1. Are there key leadership practices that are being used more or less frequently during the COVID-19 pandemic compared to before?
2. How does the COVID-19 pandemic compare to other crises in terms of key leadership practices being used more?

## METHODS

### Sample
- Senior leaders in a variety of functions and organizations (N=69) chosen by authors to participate
- Assessment Components:
  - TalentTelligent's Leader Performance Behavior Library survey tool
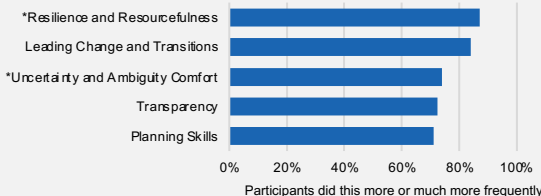  - 5-pt scale

### Practices
- 35 total (e.g., self-management, achievement drive, leading change and transitions, uncertainty and ambiguity comfort, resilience and resourcefulness, personal brand management, demonstrating presence)
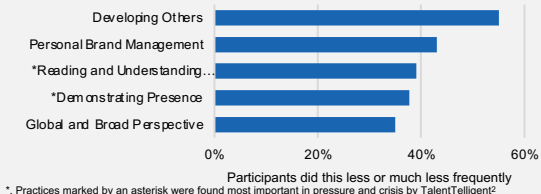
### Procedure
- Participants rated the extent to which the frequency of each practice used by leaders changed, according to definitions and behaviors describing each practice, now compared to before the pandemic
- 5-pt scale ranging from 'much more frequently' to 'about the same' to 'much less frequently'
- A virtual survey tool was used to assess leader performance was administered between May 8, 2020 and June 8, 2020
- The average relative frequency of practices used now compared to before the pandemic was calculated by aggregating individual responses

## Practices Most Likely to be Used **More** Frequently Relative to Before the Pandemic



Bar chart: *Resilience and Resourcefulness; Leading Change and Transitions; *Uncertainty and Ambiguity Comfort; Transparency; Planning Skills. X-axis 0%–100%. "Participants did this more or much more frequently"

## Practices Most Likely to be Used **Less** Frequently Relative to Before the Pandemic



Bar chart: Developing Others; Personal Brand Management; *Reading and Understanding…; *Demonstrating Presence; Global and Broad Perspective. X-axis 0%–60%. "Participants did this less or much less frequently"

*. Practices marked by an asterisk were found most important in pressure and crisis by TalentTelligent[2]

## The Keys to Developing Leaders for an Uncertain Future
- The pandemic required leaders to demonstrate calm and focus under pressure; to react quickly to adversity; and to make decisions and provide a clear direction
- The increase in transparency may be related to employee concerns around the economy and their job security; uncertainty around organizations' future directions; and a heightened need for reassurance and compassion during anxious times[1]
- The decrease in developing others may be a result of the increased difficulty to provide this support virtually and/or leaders may have lost sight of certain fundamental leadership duties while concentrating more on crisis-specific practices

## RESULTS

### Key Leadership Practices in Any Crisis
- Five practices were selected by over 70% of participants as being used more frequently compared to before the pandemic
- Two of the five practices used more frequently, *resilience and resourcefulness* (87%) and *uncertainty and ambiguity comfort* (74%) align with what Pearman and Eichinger[2] found most important in times of pressure and crisis

### Leadership Practices Unique to the COVID-19 Crisis
- The other more frequently used practices may be more unique to the current crisis: l*eading change and transitions* (84%), *planning skills* (71%), and *transparency* (72%)

### Potential Leadership Blind Spots
- More than half of participants (55%) indicated they are *developing others* less frequently compared to before the pandemic
- Around 40% of leaders reported using the following practices less frequently: *personal brand management* (43%), *reading and understanding individuals* (39%), and *demonstrating presence* (38%)

## DISCUSSION: ORGANIZATIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

### Evolve High Potential Management
- This research suggests that the pandemic is forcing leaders to demonstrate exceptional practices and organizations should identify stretch assignments and be prepared to support leaders with coaching and feedback
- Build "bench strength" and muscle build future leaders' (those of the succession short list) capabilities to handle a VUCA environment now, before they get into the C-Suite

### Proactively Adjust Leadership Development Strategies
- Results yield insight into potential new challenge areas and learning teams must be prepared to quickly pivot and provide just-in-time development support for these emerging needs
- Organizations should proactively assess implications on future development needs as they cement visions for future work

### Prepare Senior Leaders for New Realities
- Results offer clues on a potential shift in what employees expect and need from leaders going forward
- In preparation for a post-COVID world, leaders must maintain certain practices and resist the temptation to revert to old habits
- It's critical for leaders to receive feedback on their effectiveness (e.g., pulse surveys to understand whether employees believe their leaders are effectively demonstrating transparency)
- Leaders must hold complementary skills and behaviors and apply them to changing circumstances, rather than only possessing specific expertise, to help teams adapt to unexpected change and possibly in adjusting post-COVID[3]

### Limitations
- The true frequency of practices used 'about the same' cannot be concluded because frequency was not measured before the pandemic

1 Argenti, P. (2020, August 14). Communicating Through the Coronavirus Crisis. Retrieved September 05, 2020, from https://hbr.org/2020/03/communicating-through-the-coronavirus-crisis
2 TalentTelligent. (2020, April 7). VUCA: Leading Under Pressure and Crisis [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3xtDhPu_1EA
3 Kaiser, R. B. (2020). Leading in an unprecedented global crisis: The heightened importance of versatility. Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research, 72(3), 135-154. doi:10.1037/cpb0000186