"Limping gallop": leader resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

Purpose – This article provides an in-depth study of leader resilience during the prolonged COVID-19 crisis.
Design/methodology/approach – The research is based on interviews with leaders in the hotel, retail and manufacturing industries during the pandemic. The analytical framework is individual resilience as both a process and an outcome. The analysis method is a combination of deductive and inductive content analysis.
Findings – This study offers a rich description of the interaction among the behavioural, situational and individual factors influencing leaders during the various stages of the global COVID-19 crisis.
Originality/value – Highlighting the role of leaders' personal reflections on the interaction between resilience factors and leaders' identity work, this paper contributes to the field by introducing an extended model of leader resilience.

Keywords Personal resilience, Resilience, Leader resilience, Pandemic, Managerial work

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Resilience has been one of the buzzwords of the COVID-19 pandemic, and its use has travelled from the professional vocabulary of clinical psychologists to featuring in women's magazines and semi-professional blog posts, with the presumption that everyone understands what it means. During the global crisis, resilience was discussed on the country level, in connection to business ecosystems and single companies as well as individuals who, in their private lives and at work, were faced with constant changes in plans, sickness, personal loss, adversity and other extraordinary challenges. While there are many formulations of how to define resilience, they all refer to bouncing back from hard times (Tabassum *et al.*, 2019). Indeed, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the need for resilience became paramount at the national, ecosystem, organizational and individual levels.

This paper explores leader resilience during the pandemic. While the importance of leader resilience is generally acknowledged, it remains relatively unexplored in the literature (Förster and Duchek, 2017). Resilience is essential for leaders because leaders who are unable to cope with adversities may be too stressed out to function effectively at their job (Ledesma, 2014). Resilience has also been found to be important as relationships have been established between leader resilience and job satisfaction and leader resilience and intention to quit (Hudgins, 2016).

Leaders' behaviour has also been connected to employee resilience (Salehzadeh, 2019; Walumbwa *et al.*, 2010). However, previous research shows contradictory results on the question of whether leader resilience influences employee resilience. For example, while Harland *et al.* (2005) and Zhu *et al.* (2019) found a connection between them, Lin and Liao (2020) did not establish a significant relationship between them.

Individual resilience in normal situations differs from resilience during situations characterized by extreme threats (Branicki *et al.*, 2019). During the COVID-19 pandemic, leader resilience was put to the test in a way that no laboratory experiment could. Pre-COVID research on leader resilience has been conducted in healthcare (Hudgins, 2016; Kim and Windsor, 2015), education (Reed and Blaine, 2015), among small business owner-managers (Wall and Bellamy, 2019), members of top management (Flint-Taylor *et al.*, 2014) and public sector leaders (Gray and Jones, 2018). The first empirical studies on leader resilience during the pandemic indicate that it emerged as flexible, improvised and innovative behaviour (Förster *et al.*, 2022b; Giousmpasoglou *et al.*, 2021; Lombardi *et al.*, 2021).

Distinct from examinations on resilience that define individual-level resilience as a trait or a collection of personal abilities and capabilities, this paper takes a view of individual resilience that emphasizes its contextual dependence and its nature as a multifactorial process that supports leaders in bouncing back from setbacks and increasing the possibility of functioning well under difficult circumstances in the future (Cooper *et al.*, 2013; Förster and Duchek, 2017; Förster *et al.*, 2022a; Kim and Windsor, 2015). By applying qualitative research methods, this study seeks to contribute to the research on leader resilience as both a process and an outcome by providing a rich qualitative descriptions of leader resilience processes during the pandemic and offering an extension to previous leader resilience models, which highlights leaders' active reflection and identity work during the resilience process.

The following section discusses the existing knowledge on leader resilience, followed by an introduction of the data and analysis methods. Thereafter, the findings section is organized by the division of resilience attributes into leader behavioural, individual and situational factors. The article concludes by introducing a triple-helix model of leader resilience and discussion.

Leader resilience

Research on leader resilience is fragmented and replete with contradictory results. For example, there are contradictory results on whether male of female education leaders are more resilient (Lazaridou and Beka, 2015; Reed and Blaine, 2015). Furthermore, while Howard and Irving (2014) established a link between resilience and leaders' self-differentiation), in their later study (2021), they concluded that this holds true in US and Indian samples but not among German leaders. A practitioner interested in, for example, the relationship between leader resilience and training or leader resilience and difficult experiences will find it difficult to understand why the results by Howard and Irving (2021) showed a significant relationship between leader resilience and courses and resilience and personal mistakes but no connection between leader resilience and degree education or leader resilience and crisis experience.

The inconsistencies in prior research are largely due to varying conceptions regarding what is meant by resilience and their subsequent operationalizations as research instruments. The literature on personal resilience in the work context approaches the phenomenon from three perspectives. According to the first perspective, personal resilience is a relatively stable set of characteristics or abilities that help an individual through stress and difficulty (Connor and Davidson, 2003). This approach accentuates that some individuals are more resilient than others and that highly resilient individuals will exercise high resilience in all contexts and circumstances. The second perspective conceptualizes personal resilience as a capacity. This view stresses that it changes over time in interactions between an individual and their environment (Egeland *et al.*, 1993) and implies that personal resilience can also be developed. The third perspective conceptualizes personal resilience not only as a process that develops over time but also as an outcome. Survival through difficult times can lead to lasting benefits that make individuals stronger for the future. This view is accentuated by Cooper *et al.* (2013), who defined resilience (p. 15) as "being able to bounce back from setbacks and to

keep going in the face of tough demands and difficult circumstances, including the enduring strength that builds from coping well with challenging or stressful events".

The workplace resilience framework of Cooper *et al.* (2013) builds on the idea that personal resilience results from the interaction of individual and situational resilience factors. Individual resilience factors comprise personality and resilience resources (confidence, social support, adaptability and purposefulness), while situational factors include workplace pressure and support and issues related to, for example, work–family balance. This view of personal resilience highlights that it is a complex process and not a stable set of characteristics or abilities. As resilience is not one-dimensional, it also means that some personal characteristics may be beneficial in certain circumstances but harmful in others. Moreover, resilience in some instances does not mean that a person has resilience in other situations.

This approach to personal resilience arguably provides a good explanation of the contradictory results of previous resilience studies. The resilience factors are so intertwined that comparing certain characteristics between people and arguing that some individuals are more resilient than others does not help us understand the complexity of personal resilience. This multifaceted approach to resilience also legitimizes qualitative research, whose aim is to understand and provide deep insight into this complex phenomenon.

Förster and Duchek (2017) noted that in the literature on leader resilience, a majority of studies have adopted the view that resilience is a trait or capacity. Only a few studies have examined leader resilience as both a process and an outcome. The few exceptions include Kim and Windsor's (2015) study of first-line nurse managers, studies of female leaders (Duchek *et al.*, 2022; Förster and Duchek, 2022) and an examination of healthcare leaders' resilience (Förster *et al.*, 2022a, b).

Förster and Duchek (2017) developed an understanding of leader resilience as both a process and an outcome by expanding the workplace resilience framework of Cooper *et al.* (2013). In Förster and Duchek's (2017) exploratory interview study on female leaders, they grouped interview data into four large categories – factors that necessitate resilience, individual resilience factors, situational resilience factors and behavioural resilience factors – and built a framework explaining the complex interactions among them. Factors that necessitate resilience (e.g. digitalization) influence the interaction of leader individual factors (e.g. optimism) and situational factors (e.g. positive work climate). The interaction between these factors results in the leader resilience process, that is, how leaders use existing resilience factors at work when performing managerial duties and working with their followers. This dynamic, multifactorial framework of leader resilience (Cooper *et al.*, 2013; Förster and Duchek, 2017) guides this study.

The aim of this research is to contribute to the study of leader resilience by examining leaders' resilience processes during the prolonged COVID-19 crisis. The objective is to provide a rich description of resilience factors and their interactions. The study is guided by the following research question: how did the leader resilience factors interact during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Methods

The data were collected in Finland through interviews with 13 female and 8 male participants who served in leadership positions during the pandemic. Their leadership experience ranged from less than a year to over 25 years. They all worked in companies that were unable to shift to remote work completely. Purposive sample strategy was used to find seven participants in three pre-selected industries (hotel, retail and manufacturing industries) in different parts of the country. Prospective participants were identified through contacting their employers, researcher's own network and by reading their prior Internet interviews or blogs and invited

by personal e-mail. Invitations were sent to reach the target number of interviews in each industry as 60% of those invited either replied or denied participation. The participants in the hotel industry worked as hotel managers, general managers, front desk managers or hotel restaurant managers. The retail participants worked as store managers, service managers, department store managers or retailers in grocery stores, speciality goods trade or department stores. The manufacturing participants represented paper, chemical, metal, food and construction industries and held titles such as foreman, managing director, maintenance manager, factory manager and production manager. The participants were situated in both urban and rural locations, and the sample also included participants in two smaller cities that had been in the media because of the rapid spread of the coronavirus, which paralysed all normal activities in the city.

The interviews were conducted in the fall of 2021, and thus, the participants had 1.5 years of experience of leading their employees through the conditions brought on by the global pandemic. At the time, Finland was on the cusp of the end of the third wave of the pandemic and heading into the fourth, and vaccinations were already available.

The interview protocol was designed to support the narrative sensemaking of the participants and was structured around four themes: (1) the sequence of events during the pandemic in the participants' company, (2) the well-being of employees during the pandemic, (3) the well-being of the participant during the pandemic and (4) the participants' forecast on how their workplace would adjust to new normal conditions after the pandemic. The participants were informed of these themes before the interview and were able to orientate to the interview beforehand. The participants gave their consent to have their anonymized interview transcripts to be stored in a secure storage and that they can be used for research.

The interview style followed the guidelines of Rubin and Rubin (2012) as the main goal was to hear the stories that the participants were willing to share while engaging in retrospective sensemaking. The role of the interviewer was to offer prompts by asking open-ended questions that encouraged story sharing (e.g. please tell me about the start; how did the coronavirus affect your work for the first time?) and seeking more detailed reflections when the participants recounted events, for example, about personal feelings regarding laying off personnel.

Due to COVID-19-related restrictions, the participants were interviewed via virtual platforms, except one face-to-face interview. Each interview lasted 50 min, on average, and was transcribed verbatim, then anonymized.

The analysis began by reading the transcripts for multiple times. The first round of coding revealed substantial differences in the participants accounts of their personal well-being during the pandemic which resulted in categorization of the transcripts were into three groups. The first group comprised leaders who maintained that despite severe challenges during the pandemic, their well-being did not differ from that of pre-pandemic times or highlighted positive aspects such as learning or spending more time with family. Six participants from the sample were classified into this group. The following key quotes represent the group category:

Personally, I did not consider it tougher than before. Of course, occasionally, we needed to take harsh actions and think. (M5)

I am sort of a positive person, so I just valued the experience and said to myself, 'gosh, think what an opportunity! The ability to conduct these kinds of negotiations will give me a huge advantage in the future'. (H3)

That time was even less stressful and somehow better for issues outside of work. (M3)

The second group consisted of leaders who revealed experiencing serious stress-related issues, anxiety or symptoms of burnout. Six participants were grouped into this category. The following quotes represent the group classification:

> This has been quite hard. I tend to say that I must be corona-depressed. This is the term I use to describe myself now. I just, I don't get any pleasure. It is kind of hard to be interested in a lot of issues at the moment. This is very atypical of me – atypical, indeed! (R1)

> Now, I feel that nothing feels like anything. Certain issues used to annoy me or frustrate me or give me anxiety while expecting the next bomb to explode and waiting to get home and those kinds of thoughts. Now, I just somehow feel numb. (R4)

> . . . I had physical symptoms, actual physical symptoms. I needed to go to hospital to check if they were heart-related as my body reacted so fiercely. (R5)

The third category comprised leaders who shared stories about dealing with difficulties and hardships during the pandemic, feeling stressed and burdened in connection with these occasions but still being able to harness the capability or social support to overcome them. Nine participants from the sample were classified into this group. The following quotes describe the personal well-being of the participants in this group:

> Of course it was challenging and tough recruiting and this continuing hassle that we had, but it was not overwhelming, in my opinion. We managed, but by no means has it been easy. (R2)

> My well-being has been mostly good. Good, but when we had the outbreak, my well-being was at stake. (. . .) It was a tough time then, and I had to use all what I had learned about self-leadership. I used to go to walk and would often call our internal coach to make my own thoughts clear and shift to the positive side. Besides this, my well-being has been fine. (M7)

> . . . perhaps the hardest moment was when we were approaching the main sales season and half of the people were absent. At that time, I kind of felt, 'oh gosh, how we are going to make it', but no kind of burnout at any stage or anxiety. On the contrary, it was sort of a good feeling when we started to look for ways to survive this. (R3)

The analysis continued with a close examination of the transcripts in the third group because these participants' stories were considered the most informative in terms of providing insight into leader resilience. They were under pressure but were able to function despite the challenges and without severe well-being problems. The transcripts were coded using the subgroups of Förster *et al.* (2022a, b) under the main categories of behavioural, individual, situational and behavioural resilience factors (Table 1).

In addition, inductive content analysis was used to point to themes emerging from the data that had not been highlighted in prior research. Therefore, as many participants revealed that they themselves had to work overtime during the pandemic, the subgroup "extending own working hours" was added to the category of behavioural resilience factors. Moreover, as many participants talked about the value and support of their professional peer groups, the subcategory "social support in private life" was modified as "social support" and included peer group activities outside of the workplace. In addition, a major theme absent from prior research emerged in the data. Many of the participants started questioning their leadership and willingness to be a leader during the turbulent pandemic times. Therefore, in addition to the three above-mentioned major coding categories discussed in the previous research on leader resilience as a process and outcome (Förster and Duchek, 2017; Förster *et al.*, 2022a, b), a theme emerged in the data that encompassed the participants' mental reflection on their work as leaders. The group was labelled "identity work". It includes participants' interview quotes referring to their being or changing as a leader and their intentions to stay or quit that position.

Behavioural resilience factors		Individual resilience factors		Situational resilience factors		Identity work	
Reflection and change behaviour	61	Openness to learn and change	8	Network and exchange	20	Identity work	22
Analytical structured procedure	54	Positive attitude	8	Atmosphere at work	13		
Open communication and interaction	36	Social skills	6	Feedback and recognition	6		
Accepting the situation	15	Personal skills	4	Healthy lifestyle	4		
Differentiation*	13	Confidence and self-efficacy	3	Flexibility	2		
Extending own working hours	11			Social support	3		
Compensation*	9			Importance of work	3		

Note(s): "Differentiation" refers to managers' conscious efforts to distance themselves from work-related thoughts in their free time and the subgroup of "compensation" covers managers' active attempts to find refreshing activities to balance their work (Förster *et al.*, 2022)
Source(s): Author's own work

The coding unit was a sentence, a chain of sentences or part of a sentence carrying meaning. In the coding of the individual resilience factors, only those traits and abilities mentioned by the participants were coded. For example, if a participant said that he always preferred positive thinking or that he had received good feedback in a personnel survey, the codes of positive attitude and social skills were used. In this paper, the participants' quotes are represented by letters indicating the sector (H for hotels, M for manufacturing and R for retail), with a random number between one and seven. Table 1 offers an overview of the codes and their frequency in the data set.

Findings
Behavioural factors
The largest subgroup under leader behavioural factors was "reflection and change behaviour". It illustrated that the leaders were actively pondering how turbulence in the external environment would affect their company or subunit. They followed the media, internal company information, industry-level foresight, global trade forecasts and analyzed competitors' operations to be better prepared to make decisions and alter them as circumstances changed.

A major concern for the leaders was the well-being of their employees during the pandemic. In the customer-facing fields, the concern for employee well-being was also connected to the leaders' reflections on changing customer behaviour as the following quotes illustrate.

Perhaps the hardest thing has been to see people's pain, what it [pandemic] has caused, their insecurity. Personally, I have had the feeling all the time that I will survive, but will they? (H1)

. . . then, 1.5 years ago and I thought that in normal life, when we enter that kind of crisis situation, we would show solidarity and be forgiving and understanding. But well, at some point, I noticed that it had sort of changed, including customers. We noticed at some stage that our customers had a shorter fuse; they were kind of not tolerating anything out of the ordinary or something, for example, queuing longer . . . (H2)

The "analytical structured procedure" subgroup – which was described by Förster *et al.*
(2022a, b) as "analysing a problem, developing a solution and using available resources
adequately" – was a major theme throughout the interview data. Under normal
circumstances, leaders analyze situations, develop solutions and apply existing resources.
During the pandemic, they needed to do that repeatedly, adjusting previous plans to the
changing environment. Leaders were required to protect their customers, employees and
themselves against the virus, at times in an information vacuum. The information regarding
safety measures was given by officials and senior management of the companies in small
snippets, and much localization was needed for successful implementation. Moreover,
particularly at the beginning, as face masks and disinfectants were in short supply, they
could not be easily purchased.

Leaders needed to adjust the workforce to customer demand. Hotels and some shops were
completely closed, some even several times, which meant temporary layoffs. At the point of
reopening, the leaders had to estimate the customer demand and decipher how many of their
employees should be called back to work and in what order. Staff schedules needed constant
remaking, including because of absences due to COVID-19 illness. In addition, particularly in
the retail and hotel industries, employees who were previously laid off due to COVID-19 often
changed occupation, which meant that leaders needed to recruit new personnel with the
return of customers. One of the participants in the hotel industry (H7) described his
experience as a "limping gallop", referring to her endeavours to match the constantly
changing staff supply to constantly changing customer demand to keep branch operations
running.

The "open communication" subcategory reflects many new nuances of the extraordinary
communication needs resulting from the pandemic. These differed from normal
circumstances and varied between industries, pandemic stages and companies. At a
construction site where one of the participants worked, they had more "chit-chats" than usual
(M2), whereas the layoffs in the hospitality sector created new complications for the leaders,
thinking for the first time in their careers about the extent to which they should communicate
with staff who were laid off. Do the employees want any contact from their superiors if they
are not being paid, or is it a sign of a responsible leader to call an employee during a lay-off
period? Moreover, due to the pandemic-related requirement of social distancing, normal
conference rooms could not be used. In factories and construction sites where work was done
in shifts, it was important that staff from different shifts did not meet.

In addition to informing employees about safety measures, open communication was the
preferred method to relieve anxiety and fear. The following quotes illustrate the leaders'
strategies in communication with their staff.

> . . . well, to calm down, discuss the aspects of the situation and ask what we could do, how we could
> support the [laid-off] person and try to bring in the positive in the difficult situation. (H1)

> I stressed that we do not have the mask for our sake, but we take care of customers and colleagues,
> and that if one, unfortunately, has the disease, one does not want to spread the virus so that someone
> in the risk group can get it, or in the worst case, dies because of it just because someone did not follow
> orders. (R2)

The leaders' reflection and change behaviour were also connected to the coding subcategory
of "accepting the situation". The COVID-19 pandemic created unprecedented circumstances,
and although the participants would have liked to change the situation, they had no option
but to accept it. For example, if people are not allowed to travel due to lockdowns, there will be
no hotel customers, which ultimately means laying off personnel, including hotel managers.
One hotel manager described that there was no choice but to accept this situation. For
someone in a managerial position, this also meant getting used to giving notices.

Of course it was a big shock at the beginning. Layoffs and everything else. But we have realized that there is a reason for that, and we are all in the same boat. And once you have personally been laid off, you know how it feels. Well, you will adapt to this [giving notices] in the end the more you do it. After that, it does not feel that difficult. (H2)

As vaccinations against the coronavirus became available, the leaders were clearly relieved. Many shared that their staff had openly discussed getting vaccinated; however, as vaccinations are a personal matter, the leaders had to accept that they could not intervene if a staff member decided against being unvaccinated and risked infecting other employees at work. A participant working at a factory contemplated this in the interview:

But we do not have any authority, rights, command to vaccinate, although it would be the easiest way. But everyone has their own rights what to take and what not. (M7).

The codes in the subgroup of "extending own working hours" indicated that managers had to often work over-time to deal with unexpected circumstances and also substitute their followers when sick or being ordered to quarantine and the contents of the subcategories of "differentiation" and "compensation" revealed how leaders sought ways to gain energy from activities outside work such as reading, studying, going outdoors, exercising and breathing. These were of particular importance as leaders were unsure that they could have days off work or vacations as scheduled because they needed to replace their absent staff members.

Hobbies help, of course, but of course, if I have tried to solve a severe staff shortage at work, I will keep thinking about it. (R2)

Every time your phone rings, your first thought is that someone is absent and here we go again. During the entire summer, you could not plan anything for your days off because you'd anticipate that you'd need to replace someone. (H1)

Individual factors
The subcategory of "openness to learn and change" indicated that the participants appreciated the unique learning opportunity presented by the pandemic, which contributed to their leader career. One of the participants reflected by saying that "the two years I have been in this [leader] position must have given me four years" worth of learning' (H7).

Most of the participants referred to having a "positive attitude" in their interviews. A positive outlook on life helped them cope with hardships and in conversations with staff to direct their attention to the positive sides of difficult situations.

The "social skills" and "personal skills" subgroups covered diverse skills that can be considered to refer to universally accepted skills of a good leader, such calmness, action-orientation, being easily approachable, solutions-focus and ability to handle stress. According to the participants, these were the competencies that they personally valued in themselves during the difficult times as well as receiving positive feedback from their followers.

Situational factors
Under the category of "situational factors", the subgroups "network and exchange" and "atmosphere and support at work" featured most frequently. When the participants referred to the atmosphere at work, they had a very positive tone, emphasizing its significance during the different stages of the pandemic, as illustrated in the following quotes:

We have had a tremendously good team spirit and trust her in our team. So that has helped everyone in adjusting. (H2)

In fact, it turned out that we had a really nice time at work. We invented new ways; we all used walkie-talkies; we were innovative, even though we were not able to meet in person and had to wear masks; so using walkie-talkies, humour – it sort of helped everyone. (R7)

The opportunity to ventilate ideas and feelings with a peer group "when one notices that everyone has a similar situation you have lived through" (H7) was deemed to be of "tremendous importance" (R3), whether it consisted of fellow leaders in the same establishment or, for example, other store managers in neighbouring locations. However, the participants gave sharply contrasting accounts of the support from their own superiors and human resource department during the pandemic crisis. The ability to discuss pandemic-related measures and feelings with one's own superior was supportive of well-being. Those who did not receive this support clearly craved it, as the following quotes illustrate.

But because of coronavirus [my boss] could not always come in. And I personally feel that it would be important to have one in everyday life. . . . I want to be honest and discuss. And I have brought up that I needed, and I believe that all managers here needed, more support from our own boss in this location. (H1)

It is very important that I can trust the managerial group that I have as peers or as superiors and can share [worries] together, that I find a trusted colleague with whom I can ventilate this. Now, I notice that I am in a situation where I do not have an immediate superior in this unit . . . so I am quite alone in here. (H4)

Identity work
The findings of this study indicate that active leader identity work was involved in the leader resilience process during the pandemic. The exceptional circumstances and prolonged nature of the crisis made the leaders question the kind of leaders they were and whether they wanted to continue as leaders, at least in the industry or company they were employed at the time, as the following quotes reflect.

I believe that I have never thought about changing the industry where I work as often as I have during the last year. (H1)

Also, I am always thinking about how long I can endure this if it continues from here. I have been able to think positive and persevere . . . but if this continues, you will hear customers [rage] every day. (R7)

. . . I have questioned a lot whether this is it. But then I ponder what else would I want and what I am able to do. This is such a cool industry [hospitability] and this is so nice and wholly a people industry. But in terms of employers, I have thought more about whether it would be possible in some other company. (H5)

The personal experience of being temporarily laid off accelerated the meaning-making of professional identity. A hotel manager shared her own reflections on this:

I was somehow devastated because the meaning of my own work disappeared completely. My profession. We only need one pandemic like this, and I am no longer needed. It was a really big deal to me to notice that nurses are really important – so are people in grocery stores. Appreciation for them increased in that situation, which was absolutely amazing. But for me, I had a job people do not need. It was a really big deal for me. At some point, I questioned whether this was what I wanted from my life. (H2)

Leader identity work also encompassed the participants' experiences of being in middle management and in a larger organization where they were unable to share all they knew with their employees. Active identity work also meant taking a step back to see how they had developed as leaders during the pandemic. The following quotes illustrate these aspects of leader identity work.

The role of a leader is quite difficult. You should act as a filter. I should, as a leader, I should build trust for the future and maintain positivity and try to smile. But I may have sorrows and perhaps know more than I can share. My own well-being can be at stake or something else, but I must still take employees' well-being onto my shoulders and try to solve their problems. So sometimes, it is like being a chameleon and filtering. (H5)

Well, I would say that these two years that I have been here, I have received four years of learning. It has been tremendously important for my growth as a leader and by no means am I ready. One notices one's own incompleteness. (H7)

Expanded model of leader resilience

In terms of the interpretation of the leader resilience process in this study, one can arguably consider it in the context of a "limping gallop", as one of the participants (H7) called it. In order to remain resilient while taking care of their businesses and people, the leaders were busy with their normal tasks amid unprecedented and ever-changing conditions.

The multidimensional model of resilience at work (Cooper *et al.*, 2013; Förster and Duchek, 2017) applied in this study directed the research towards illuminating the constant interplay between the situational, individual and behavioural factors influencing the leader resilience process. Because the largest single coding group in the coding scheme was "reflection and change behaviour" and as this study distinguished a new coding category of "identity work", which could be interpreted as a profound reflection of leader work, this paper argues that the role of leader reflection in the resilience process is inherent in the leader resilience process.

Figure 1 introduces a "triple-helix model of the leader resilience process" where leaders' active reflection is the link between the situational, individual and behavioural factors
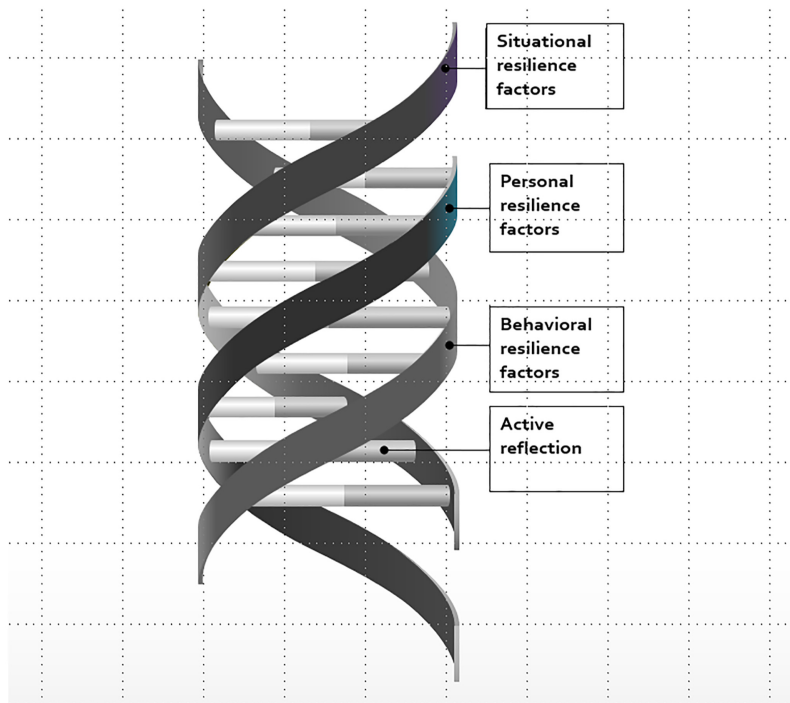

Figure 1.
The triple-helix model
of leader resilience
process

Source(s): Author's own work

influencing leaders, which also influence each other. This reflection results in resilience as an outcome as it is a learning process that changes the leader and builds prospects for later success (Cooper *et al.*, 2013). Reflection is not only one of the leadership behaviours, as suggested in the categorization study by Förster and Duchek (2017), but it also plays a much larger role in the interpretation of this research. It is the way behavioural, situational and individual factors interact. For example, if employees form an anti-vaccine group during a pandemic, a leader not only performs their duties and evaluates different legally and cost-effective options on how to proceed but also needs to take into account the organizational climate when communicating the decision. They may seek social support from peers and need to consider the consequences of the decision on staff and their own family.

The interpretation of this study is that when reflecting on these matters, a leader's identity work takes place as they form a new identity in a new situation: What kind of leader am I? Will I bend the rules and ask employees to show a vaccination certificate even though that is forbidden? Or will I risk the profitability of the company by assigning extra work in isolation to the anti-vaxxer employees? This process of reflection and identity work is both a process and an outcome that supports the leader's resilience for the future.

The importance of active leader reflection has also been recognized in prior literature. In her review, Castelli (2016) grouped the literature on the benefits of leader reflection for employees, stating that leader resilience creates a secure environment that fosters trust and transparent dialogue and establishes a link between employees' tasks and the organizational purpose. Moreover, active leader reflection enhances the self-worth of followers and demonstrates regard for diversity.

Conclusion

This paper examined the leader resilience process during COVID-19 crisis. It focused on the experiences of leaders who had suffered from work-related stress but were able to bounce back from these experiences. In other words, they were deemed perfect participants in a qualitative study to provide insight into the leader resilience process. The concentration on the experiences of these leaders enabled an in-depth qualitative analysis of the factors affecting their work. To increase the trustworthiness of the analysis, emphasis was placed on the conceptual definition. Moreover, the coding strategy, coding categories and results were explained in detail and exemplified with quotes from the participants. The multifactorial lens of leader resilience as both a process as an outcome (Cooper *et al.*, 2013; Förster and Duchek, 2017), which was used as the interpretative framework of this study, arguably explains the inconsistencies of previous research.

The study findings emphasize how leader well-being was constantly at stake during the pandemic because of the many moving parts affecting leaders' daily work. The leaders were never certain about whether there would be enough staff to perform even the basic duties. They needed to create new solutions to cope with the changes in supply and demand and could not trust that the situation on one day would be the same as on the previous day. As highlighted in previous research on leader resilience and well-being during the pandemic (Förster *et al.*, 2022a, b; Giousmpasoglou *et al.*, 2021; Lombardi *et al.*, 2021; Reineholm *et al.*, 2023), there was a need for new approaches to both new and old problems as well as managerial innovation and flexibility.

The study contributes to the study of leader resilience with the triple helix model of leader resilience as a process which expands the model of Förster and Duchek (2017) which has been built on the model by Cooper *et al.* (2013). The triple-helix model highlights leaders' active sensemaking and reflection in times of crisis, which also resulted in leader identity work. The model provides a new interpretation of how the behavioural, individual and social factors interact in the resilience process. The factors interact only if the leader actively makes sense

of them, which means abandoning old meaning perspectives and creating new ones that make better sense in the new, changed environment. This builds leader resilience.

Previous research shows that leader identity is connected with increased likelihood of burn-out (Hamouche and Marchand, 2021). Therefore, to support leader resilience and mental health workplaces could benefit from actively encouraging leaders to perform identity work and active reflection, particularly during crisis.

Prior literature also indicates that active leader self-reflection is linked with increased communication, trust and employee self-esteem (Castelli, 2016). Managers need to be alert not only to the new demands caused by a rapidly changing external environment but also to have the cognitive and emotional capacity to respond to their followers' changing needs and behaviours during challenging times and help them adjust to new circumstances.

Workplaces could systematically support leader active sense-making during crises by organizing forums for active leader reflection. As time is limited in times of crisis, it would be beneficial to hold informal peer-group gatherings without an agenda. In these meetings, leaders can share their own ideas on what is going on and hear how others interpret the signals from the environment and will act upon them. A peer group can be a place for active reflection on what it is to be a leader when there is complete turbulence and the issues that were previously taken for granted are to be approached from a new perspective. Joint sense-making in peer-groups can also accelerate organizational learning which is important for workplaces to be better prepared for future environmental disruptions (Karanika-Murray *et al.*, 2023).

Also coaching services for leaders can also be recommended. As a few participants with experience of these services during the pandemic explained, the coaches helped them concentrate on the root causes of their problems and pointed to new approaches to enable them to recover more quickly from setbacks. In addition, workplaces could invest in digital tools that support leader self-reflection. High-quality digital courses or other forms of information, toolboxes, or apps on workplace well-being can be considered a good investment, as they can be utilized when needed. Moreover, investing in the training of managers on issues related to well-being at work will not only improve their abilities for self-leadership and reflection but also help them support their followers' well-being. This type of training and awareness is also needed at the senior manager level, as top managers should recognize work-related stress and burnout among their middle managers as a business-critical risk that threatens the survival of organizations, particularly during disruptive times.

Workplaces could also provide support for those managers whose identity work, whether to continue in a managerial position or not, concludes with a decision to leave the role and seek another position within the same organization. Instead of viewing such a career shift as "downshifting," the career move could be seen as a new beginning offering advantages for both the organization and the loyal employee. A former line manager could, for example, be of vital help in a new role as a human resource specialist organizing managerial support programs and further training.

As many of the study participants shared in their interviews, the well-being of the middle managers was easily forgotten during the pandemic. This is an important issue that can be improved and underscored as organizations build plans on how to survive the next global crisis. The leadership of leaders should not be forgotten. "How are you?" is a simple and cost-effective way for their own superiors to support the well-being of middle manager.

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