

# Leadership dynamics and Covid-19 crisis management in Singapore: a contingency approach

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The goal of this study is to explore the role leadership play by Singapore’s government in the handling of the Covid-19 crisis and to suggest recommendations around the leadership dynamics in solving similar challenges experienced by businesses, organizations and societies.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This review was conducted using a case study and a desk review, a systematic review as well as a narrative method where physical books, web searches, online platforms, patterns in related occurrences and related literature were used to support the study. The review was anchored on the contingency approach and the stakeholder theory. Two hypotheses were developed and tested using qualitative comparative analysis. The study finding showed that the Singapore government used an all-inclusive functional leadership approach in curtailing the effect of the pandemic on Singaporeans. The study recommends that in decision-making, being proactive and timely is critical, and developing more conceivable and holistic crisis response plans through an integrated orientation is paramount to the successful achievement of a goal.

**Findings** – Despite some flaws, it was found that the Singaporean government had conveniently used a contingency leadership approach through an all-inclusive functional leadership to mitigate the effect of Covid-19 through the use of social media, messaging apps and effective communication, effective pandemic control techniques, albeit in a proactive manner. As a result, Singapore’s mortality rate was relatively lower than that of other nations that were adversely affected by the epidemic, earning them a prime position in the crisis response. The study, therefore, contends that their proactive response to containing the pandemic can be used as a model for people, businesses, the political system and society to lessen incidents of a similar nature in the future.

**Practical implications** – Policymakers, scholars and frontline workers may have sufficient reason to devote time to developing a more viable, comprehensive crisis response plan by pursuing an integrated learning strategy, through the use of contingency approaches and drawing on past experiences in dealing with global health emergencies. Apart from this, Singapore’s experience will serve as a lesson for the management of businesses and leaders of societies to take proactive steps in dealing with challenges as soon as they arise.

**Originality/value** – This review showed that contingency is a reality faced by every society and organization and people’s collective responsibility is a necessity during such time. Therefore, when an organization/institution is in a familiar situation, policymakers, academics and business management/leaders need to be proactive and also reflect on past experiences to deal with current and future mistakes in the course of daily operations in an organization/society.

**Keywords** Covid-19, Management, Crisis, Singapore, Contingency

**Paper type** Case study



## 1. Introduction

Today's organizations and societies function in a fast-changing physical and economic environment. These environmental changes have a substantial impact on the existence and accomplishment of organizations and civilizations (Tomecko & Dondo, 2012). As a result, crisis management strategy is of interest to most chief executive officers (CEOs) and management experts. By developing a crisis management strategy, a company can defend itself against risks brought on by environmental changes, as claimed by McConnel (2010). Changes in an organization's internal or external environments that are deemed to be risky to its efficacy are known as crises (Drennan, McConnell, & Stark, 2015). As environmental volatility increases, it is more frequent for an organization to face difficulties in developing and implementing its strategy.

Crisis management is the process of preparing for possibly undesirable consequences and creating useful strategies for risk reduction. Fearn-Banks (2006) defined crisis management as the process of being prepared for unanticipated events. He went on to say that a crisis is a situation that is difficult to handle because of time restraints, a high degree of uncertainty and a lack of control. This suggests that a crisis is an unanticipated incident that necessitates a rapid response, distorts organizational capabilities, fosters uncertainty and endangers a company's/society's reputation. Millar (2008) opined that a crisis has the capacity to radically alter an organization's personality, depending on its strength. Crisis management is therefore crucial for every company to thrive (Burnett, 2008).

The unique Covid-19 disease-causing severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-Cov-2) virus is currently ravaging the globe (Shereen, Khan, Kazmi, Bashir, & Siddique, 2020). The World Health Organization (WHO) declared the current wave of infection, with symptoms mostly affecting the respiratory system and escalating rates of morbidity and mortality in most nations, to be a pandemic on March 11, 2020 (Cucinotta & Vanelli, 2020). The primary causes of the outbreak appear to be symptomatic and asymptomatic SARS-Cov-2 carriers who can spread the virus through droplets or direct contact with infected surfaces (World Health Organization, 2020). Since its discovery in Wuhan, China, in 2019, the deadly coronavirus disease which broke out in 2019 (Covid-19) has been causing a lot of havoc. When the Chinese that traveled home in January 2020 returned to their different destinations across the world, the virus's effects were felt all over the world (Heymann & Shindo, 2020). Covid-19 inflicted a lot of problems in people's health and their economic lives just a few months into the year 2020 (Abdullah & Kim, 2020). This immediately and firmly led to the majority of countries going under a systematic lockdown (Whitworth, 2020).

The first occurrence in Singapore was in January 2020, when a Chinese man, who was 66 years old, entered Singapore from Wuhan. As much as possible, the experience of Singapore during the outbreaks of SARS in 2003 and swine flu (H1N1) in 2009, has made it possible for them to respond quickly and effectively to the impact and high prevalence of Covid-19 infection, as well as subdue a rising death toll, especially among citizen over 60 years and also subdue the rising death of people with underlying health conditions (Abdullah & Kim, 2020). Consequently, the government was able to devise a stronger means of assisting the populace in reinforcing their public health (Abdullah & Kim, 2020; Koo *et al.*, 2020). In line with this, the government of Singapore forfeited a lot of economic activities to carry out different control measures such as banning people from traveling, checking people's temperature, tracing people who had contact with infected others, compulsorily confining people to stay at home and compulsory wearing of masks among others.

### 1.1 Singapore's problems and issues

Despite having a robust response, in the beginning, the Singapore government still has significant shortcomings. The discovered mistakes revealed that Covid-19 was mistakenly

believed to be more severe than H1N1 or SARS and that the prime minister even compared the pandemic's early fatality rate to that of the flu virus. Second, the government deliberately opposed mask use, particularly among individuals who were asymptomatic, a policy that was later changed. The third error by the administration, when it failed to pay close attention to the migrants living in the dorms, was by far the most significant (Low, 2020). The incorrect evaluation of the virus's seriousness made it difficult to implement measures like a lockdown or "the circuit breaker" as quickly as in other nations. For instance, Singapore's circuit breaker was not put into effect until April 7. The latter's restrictions were less strict even then, thus it needed to be gradually increased. Similarly, the Prime Minister and at least four Ministers announced their decision to discourage the use of masks, including the Minister for Health, who acknowledged explicitly that donning a mask would offer healthy people a false sense of security (Lai, 2020).

Given that the bulk of incidents involving foreign workers in dormitories was high, Singapore made the grave mistake of relying excessively on low-cost migrant labor, as evidenced by the one million low-paid overseas employees who call Singapore home. Although there should have been a cause for concern when the code was changed from low (yellow) to moderate (orange) on February 7, 2020, Mr. Loong was sure that they could combat Covid-19 after beating SARS.

Despite these, the authorities decided not to test Singaporeans who returned from hotspots like the United Kingdom (UK) and the US or concentrated mostly on contact tracing rather than mass testing from the start. However, the returnees were only told to remain at home or book rooms in the hotels that the government had designated. Up until late February, the Singaporean government and its medical staff had come to the conclusion that the virus could not spread asymptotically (Khalik, 2020).

Moreover, the challenges faced by public health and the financial problems arising afterward made Singapore rely heavily on "learning", both to assess how the crisis was responded to and to determine how new policies and procedures could be used in the future (Boin, Lodge & Luesink, 2020). As a result, this review categorizes the management of the dreaded disease (Covid-19) in Singapore into the trial-and-error period, in-between learning period, contingency learning period (Abdullah & Kim, 2020) and functional period. These periods represent the extent to which the government's policy and capacity-building activities adjust to changing circumstances in order to reduce any problem in the delivery of public service to the citizenry.

To fulfill the study's objectives, therefore, this review used a systematic review and a desk review method, scanning journal publications and studying other gray literature about Singapore's response to the Covid-19 outbreak. Publications on the Covid-19 pandemic as well as pertinent pieces on how other countries handled a comparable crisis were also assessed. This helps the researchers keep their focus on the evaluation criteria and the data needed for the preliminary synthesis of the review and the final report. Desk research was preferred because it can be done at a lesser cost than field research and is mostly used to examine existing information to find gaps and opportunities. It also assists in compiling data to back up the final report. In line with the above, the study aims to study the leadership dynamics of Singapore's government in mitigating the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic among its citizens. However, this review aims to achieve the following specific objectives:

- (1) Confirm the leadership approaches applied in curtailing the effect of Covid-19 on the people of Singapore,
- (2) Investigate the influence of these approaches in achieving a role-model-status among different countries around the globe,
- (3) Suggest recommendations for individuals, organizations and societies.

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## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework introduces and discusses the theories that provide an explanation for how the research problem under consideration emerges. The theories underpinning this study are Fiedler's contingency theory and stakeholder theory. The sections that follow provide explanations of these two theories.

*2.1.1 Using the contingency theory to explain the Singapore Covid-19 situation.* According to the contingency theory by Fiedler (2015), there is no one-size-fits-all set of strategic decisions that can be applied to every business situation (Nyamubarwa & Chipunza, 2019). To put it another way, there is no "one-size-fits-all" strategy for a business (Lederer, Quitt, Büsch, & Avci, 2020). Lawrence and Lorsch (1967) and Bindra, Parameswar, and Dhir (2019) argued that the environment, which includes both internal and external influences, is crucial in deciding an organization's action plans and that a single organization strategy will simply not deliver ideal results. Despite this, Rabetino, Kohtamäki, and Federico (2021) pointed out that in the contingency research tradition, a typical paradigm would focus on the contingent interaction between the dependent and independent variables in a specific circumstance.

The consequences of the Covid-19 epidemic on the global world cannot be overstated. Many countries and Singapore in particular applied the contingency theory in preserving the detrimental effects of the epidemic. A portion of the initialization is the sudden implementation of a variety of policies, rules and regulations, and control measures, including circuit breakers, forced mask wear and social distance, to reduce the impact of the outbreak on the country's overall efficiency. For instance, the manner in which Singapore responded and the successes therein were viewed under the circumstance of its distinctive public policy decisions based on the benefits received from resource allocation. It was as far as possible a steep learning curve for Singapore and many countries in the world that had never encountered anything like it before. In line with this, the Ministry of Health issued national guidelines for managing Covid-19 patients, which were adjusted to fit the country's public health needs. In addition, the government of Singapore made effective use of some abandoned buildings as isolation centers. Likewise, empty hotel rooms were repurposed for Stay-At-Home signs to confine incoming tourists for two weeks, while exhibition centers were converted into community isolation facilities. These are steps taken by the government to manage the situation at hand. The Singapore government recognizes that changes in conditions (outbreak of Covid-19) lead to the implementation of policies and processes to control the unprecedented outbreak (Kim, Chung, Lee, & Preis, 2015). Changes in the environment or organizational factors can alter the efficiency value of human capital in a dynamic, competitive economy (Porter, 1991). Understanding the context could assist in explaining why a recommended practice is valuable (Sousa & Voss, 2008).

*2.1.2 Stakeholder's theory.* In order to achieve its required goals and optional social welfare reasons, an organization should safeguard the interests of all stakeholders, according to the stakeholder theory, which is a managerial process (Freeman & Medoff, 1984). A stakeholder, according to Freeman (2004), is any person or group member who has the ability to influence a company's survival and success. The essential theme of the link between businesses and their employees, consumers, communities and overall social welfare is illuminated by the stakeholder theory (Donaldson & Preston, 1995). It has also developed into the dominant paradigm for illuminating corporate social responsibility in the literature (Francis, Hasan, Liu, & Wang, 2019). Stakeholder theory is used by enterprises as a strategic management technique to manage a variety of stakeholders, including shareholders, business partners, employees, suppliers, local communities, customers, government officials (GOs), nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and the environment (Cuesta-Valio *et al.*, 2019). These stakeholders have the ability to have a big impact on a company's ability to operate in society. This theory was pertinent to this study since Singapore's government tried to lessen

the impact of the Covid-19 outbreak by taking into account all areas of the country's economy. This approach, which took into account the citizen, the medical staff, the GOs and the foreigners residing in the dormitories, helped Singaporeans maintain their positive reputation at the time and drastically reduced the impact of the dreaded disease on the citizenry. The section that follows is an explanation of Singapore's Covid-19 experience and the strategies adopted to reduce the effect of Covid-19 on the populace.

## 2.2 Conceptual framework

*2.2.1 The Covid-19 pandemic.* The world was caught off guard by the 2019 novel coronavirus outbreak (Covid-19), which is continuously expanding and successfully interfering with daily life. The WHO reportedly declared the virus a pandemic in March 2020, according to [Azman, Singh, Parker, and Ashencaen Crabtree \(2020\)](#). The social isolation caused by the virus to prevent its rapid spread has had a negative social, medical and economic impact. These preventative measures have led to extraordinarily stressful situations in many countries. According to [Erebor \(2021\)](#), Covid-19 caused a number of health problems, including financial hardship, social disturbances, job loss, family separation, an unclear future and the inability to travel. Individuals battled a lack of enthusiasm, the new standard of working from home, anxiety and greater workloads, etc. Nevertheless, despite the issues mentioned, some employees claimed that working from home gave them more family time, which improved their focus and productivity. However, many leaders complained of being overworked and undervalued ([Watkins & Yaziji, 2020](#)). Likewise, companies saw a decline in revenue, a lack of cash flow, a disruption in supplies, a loss of capabilities, a loss of efficiency, a failure to sustain and build organizational culture, a challenge adjusting to new practices, and a challenge obtaining new capabilities ([Watkins & Yaziji, 2020](#)). In spite of all these challenges, [Morrison-Smith and Ruiz \(2020\)](#) contended that people perform better when led by leaders who comprehend and exhibit empathy during a pandemic. As a result, adapting to environmental conditions became crucial for leaders, corresponding to [Erebor's \(2021\)](#) submission that to adapt to environmental changes, leaders must innovate by exploiting their current assets, knowledge and resources, or exploitation, as well as testing and researching new strategies. Consequently, for leaders to remain relevant in the future, they must take into account new possibilities ([Khanal, Bento, & Tagliabue, 2021](#)).

*2.2.2 Leadership during the Covid-19 crisis.* Within the organizational context, leadership is defined as the execution of task-oriented responsibilities that assist, support and direct the prompt and effective maintenance of operations ([Klingborg, Moore, & Varea-Hammond, 2006](#)). According to [Alford and Beatty \(1951\)](#), "Leadership is the ability to secure desirable actions from a group of followers voluntarily without the use of coercion". [Klingborg et al. \(2006\)](#) went on to say that to plan informed next-step actions within time constraints, leaders today must think creatively and possess the capacity to record historical information. A leader must be aware of the disaster's potential effects in order to navigate a crisis in the context of an organization. Similarly, [Fener and Cevik \(2015\)](#) discuss a person's important traits that define a leader, highlighting "intuition" as one of the most important components required for leadership. Leadership during a crisis is making decisions under pressure because of the uncertainty brought on by unforeseen circumstances ([Brandebo, 2020](#)). Therefore, occasionally, there is a reluctance to deal with difficult situations, which leads to uncertainties with people, despite the obvious measures that may be done by understanding the agreed standards ([Al-Alawi, Abdulmohsen, Al-Malki, & Mehrotra, 2019](#)). As a result, proactive leadership that promotes sound judgment is essential to making sure that an organization has a thorough plan in place to implement rules for unforeseen events. Effective leaders that can guide their organizations through a transformational transition are essential for those organizations that are committed to navigating the arena of unforeseen events like

Covid-19. Leadership should alter the variables that should be taken into account when establishing a new procedure, such as present emotional state and adaptability, affecting the performance of the individual or team accordingly (Bartsch, Weber, Büttgen, & Huber, 2020).

According to a recent study, leadership during the pandemic includes learning, a focus on people, mentoring, human resources and healing emotions; never top-down, a leader who is a facilitator; a healthy work environment, a leader who is a facilitator, respect, a creative class, a leader who is a facilitator, exchange of ideas; diversity, slack, trust through sharing, teams, tolerance and embracing equality; talent, vision and commitment to the vision, technology; and a dynamic interplay between all stakeholders (Fleming & Millar, 2019).

### *2.2.3 Singapore's Covid-19 experience and strategies for managing an unprecedented crisis.*

As identified above, the Singapore government was able to reduce the impact the Covid-19 pandemic brought. Firstly, they gradually made evidence-based judgments from late January to mid-March using the experience gotten from the SARS outbreak in the past including their experience with the countries they shared their border with (e.g., Malaysia). It will not be out of place to commend the Singapore government for handling this period well. In response to the pandemic, the government from inception formed a multiministry taskforce (MMT) on January 22, 2020. Following this, the government also formed the National Centre for Infectious Diseases to facilitate connection and good communication between different departments by ensuring close working relationships between the country's scientists and the public health community. Furthermore, the government has consistently and effectively communicated with citizens using media outreach like radio, broadcast on television and newspapers to disseminate information about the pandemic to the citizenry. Likewise, the Singapore government made good use of social media and messaging Apps which were in vogue to inform the populace. Examples were the use of Facebook Live, Instagram, WhatsApp, Telegram, including YouTube by public agencies and leaders to inform the residents and update a wider audience. More specifically, Singapore has sought efficient control methods to prevent people that were infected by the virus from China as well as the spread within the community.

The first confirmed case of Covid-19 was a 66 years old man who came to Singapore from China on 23rd January 2020. The government took a prompt step to implement a series of policies, including testing people's temperature at the sea and land borders; issuing advice against traveling to all of China's territories; instituting a 2-week confinement notification for visitors coming into the country from Hubei Province in China; implementing a 14-day stay-at-home order; and then prohibiting all transits travelers that had recently lived in the city of China from entering or transiting the country, an action which the Chinese government was not comfortable with. In addition, on 7th February 2020, the government elevated the disease outbreak response system condition (DORSCON) from yellow to orange when the first cluster demonstrating the virus's anticipated rapid spread throughout the island's populations surfaced. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong disseminates the information on television the next day to emphasize the gravity of the situation. In line with the latter, and in accordance with Khanna, Cicinelli, Gilbert, Honavar, and Murthy (2020), an effort to stop the early spread of Covid-19 from mainland China, Singapore, Taiwan, South Korea and Hong Kong received remarkable global attention in the mainstream media. Woo (2020) added that because of Singapore's effective handling of the Covid-19 outbreak, the WHO recognized Singapore as a reference point for crisis management. However, with the first two Covid-related deaths on 21st March 2020, Singapore's reputation started to decline in the international community.

Between March and mid-April, the Singapore government struggled to manage the spread of the disease locally. In spite of the fact that data on foreign travelers entering the country showed increased confirmed cases, the Ministry of Education (MOE) decided to give work permits to Malaysian workers among whom some were infected, to continue to work amid strict surveillance from the Covid-19 task force (Sharma, Borah, & Moses, 2021;

Shunmuganathan, 2020). Stricter measures were implemented as the government decided to bar all guests from entering the country, prohibit events in all public spaces and large crowds, closing all educational institutions. In addition, on April 3, the Prime Minister declared that all nonessential workplaces were closed and schools moved to online learning, a phenomenon the government referred to as a “circuit breaker”. The board granted an additional budget of approximately €3.2 billion to provide assistance in the form of tax rebates, cash pay-outs and rental waivers to companies and workers affected by the pandemic (Abdullah & Kim, 2020; Ho, 2020).

Between mid-April and early May 2020, the reported cases of Covid-19 increased locally in communities. Singapore witnessed a huge increase in the number of fresh cases amongst expatriates on a daily basis as a result of the migrants who lived in the dormitories. Consequently, the authorities segregated the dormitories of foreign workers and performed mass testing, as well as boosted monitoring and circuit protection actions. Nonetheless, on the 8th of May 2020, the spread among the elderly increased and many health workers tested positive for Covid-19, thereby putting the lives of the health workers at risk. Hence, the dormitories of foreign workers became a major battleground in the country’s struggle against Covid-19, transforming this period into a period of learning through the circumstances as propounded by Fiedler (2015). The government had not necessarily planned for this, as its concentration was on the population that was not in the dormitory up to that moment.

Due to existing quarantine and medical facilities, the government’s planning system needed to shift to a higher level than before. As the emphasis was on their tight living conditions, residents began to ask questions about how migrant workers were treated. The crowded environment of the dormitories, where migrant workers were forced to live, and settings where intimate contact was inescapable, set the stage for an unavoidable and rapid increase in cases amongst the population.

Moreover, the unique coronavirus devastated the entire World and simultaneously presented many leaders with issues regarding how to manage this new disease. In line with the latter, a lot of research has investigated the leadership dynamics in different countries during the pandemic. The success of the Singapore government in mitigating the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic could be likened to some countries that handled the pandemic in a similar proactive manner. For instance, in Germany, Angela Merkel, the chancellor of Germany was praised for emphasizing evidence-based practice (EBP) during the Covid-19 outbreak (von Eiff, von Eiff, & Ghanem, 2021). Even though the 16 federal states have the constitutional authority to impose pandemic measures and limitations, Merkel took on the coordinator role for regular consultations among state government leaders and supported a coordinated, scientifically-based response throughout Germany. Merkel took the opinions of German specialists into consideration and warned state governments against eliminating limitations too quickly (Maak, Pless, & Wohlgezogen, 2021; Kupferschmidt & Vogel, 2020). Therefore, Merkel’s government provided funding for a single coronavirus task force made up of university medical departments assembled (Charite, 2020), to establish procedures and frameworks for a critical evaluation of action plans, diagnostic approaches and therapeutic approaches from all over Germany. Merkel’s government emphasized team management leadership practice and the value-based leadership model in Germany during the Covid-19 pandemic to address the fundamental leadership deficit in the healthcare sector (Wuthrich & Ingleby, 2020). This helped Germany to mitigate the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic on the populace. In like manners, Jacinda Ardern, the president of New Zealand, was a good example who urged her people to bond together to save lives. She advised that people should go home and check in on their neighbors just to empathize with the affected families. She is a typical illustration of a compassionate leader who fosters community relationships when a crisis occurs (Arden, 2020). Such mutual regard fosters a strong stakeholder culture and promotes socially responsible behavior among the citizenry.

However, according to [Maak et al. \(2021\)](#), these leadership traits are in sharp contrast to the widely criticized leadership of the United States (US) President Donald Trump and Brazil's President Jair Bolsonaro during the pandemic. These two leaders portrayed similar qualities that serve as a crucial reminder that leaders' flaws and idiosyncrasies under normal circumstances can have truly disastrous results for stakeholders during a crisis. For instance, personal ego, attention-seeking, lack of empathy, poor communication, repressed insecurities, lack of compassion and other traits adversely impacted the stakeholders during the Covid-19 pandemic in both the US and Brazil ([Karni & Rogers, 2020](#)). Out of a sense of responsibility and ego, Trump gave a false claim that the virus was under control. [Maak et al. \(2021\)](#) and [Lipton et al. \(2020\)](#) posited that proactive management practices that would have ordinarily controlled the infection were ignored. Similarly, the Brazilian president ignored the nation's constitution, denied the virus existed and showed no remorse for the increasing death toll that devastated the country ([Fonseca, Natrass, Lazaro, & Bastos, 2021](#)). These two leaders made terrible decisions that led to the staggering mortality rate that these two nations experienced while the Covid-19 virus was at its greatest. Furthermore, according to [Wardman \(2020\)](#), the UK's pandemic leadership response strategy came under serious attacks for being allegedly incompetent and accountable for the generation's worst scientific policy failure. According to [Wardman \(2020\)](#), Covid-19 is a complicated problem that presents a number of challenges, and UK leadership should employ a range of strategic tools and practices to improve substantive understandings and decision-making, foster societal resilience, and aid in the development of adaptive capability. This would, according to [Wardman and Mythen \(2016\)](#), guarantee that public goals and requirements are identified, plans to fulfill them are carried out and operations are promptly adjusted as quickly as possible in reaction to a change in circumstances or when it becomes clear that results are occurring in an unanticipated or undesirable manner.

As a result, it can be inferred that the leadership and power displayed in different countries served as determinants for the mitigating effects of the pandemic on these countries as evidenced in the countries evaluated in the above review. Therefore, the study hypothesized that:

- Ho1.* The Singapore government leadership approach did not affect the mitigation of the Covid-19 pandemic.
- Ho2.* The Singapore leadership approach did not serve as a role-model status for other countries around the globe.

### 3. Methods

An in-depth case study was used to conduct the review. Additionally, a desk review employing articles, books, journals, web searches, online platforms and related papers that served as supporting documents for achieving the study's objectives was carried out. Desk review was favored since it made it easier to find current and pertinent literature on the topic at hand, it is less costly and aids in the assessment and reporting of the findings of the review. In addition, the study used a systematic review to analyze Singapore's government power and leadership dynamics throughout the Covid-19 era. The use of a systematic review is recommended since it can identify relevant studies and events related to the Singapore government's leadership style. It promotes the ability to critically evaluate each circumstance as it arises. Similarly, it permits an objective synthesis of findings and provides a crucial, fair summary of the data while taking into consideration any discrepancies in the evidence ([Tranfield, Denyer, & Smart, 2003](#)). To meet the study goals, the review also used a narrative technique and a comparative analysis to summarize the related concepts.



The narrative method was justified because it aids researchers to look for ways to understand and then present real-life experiences through a rich description of these experiences and an exploration of the meanings that the participants derive from their experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004; Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020).

#### 4. Comparative analyses to test the hypotheses developed, and suggested alternative solutions

Singapore was arguably more positioned than other nations at the beginning to respond to Covid-19 faster and in a more cohesive manner due to the structural benefits and the advantage of past experience. The Singapore government, however, has encountered a hitch as doubt grows because there was a sharp rise in local secondary transmission of the dreaded disease. One could argue that Singapore's success started because (1) the government was proactive instead of being reactive in dealing with the virus, and (2) the government was able to strike a balance between total economic collapse on the one hand and infection control on the other like some of its neighboring countries, e.g. Malaysian, that presumed strict measures from the start of the pandemic.

The Singapore government also has modified its early policies more aggressively as a result of trial-and-error learning, initiating the "Circuit Breaker", which required them to shut down restaurants, offices and schools, and most public places, strict social distancing policies, and a ban on even private gatherings proactively. Moreover, different governments responded to the challenge of Covid-19 in different ways (Moon, 2020). Though the "Circuit Breaker" policy came a bit late, it would have been extended beyond the time frame given by the government.

Singapore's unique political structure and sociopolitical culture have allowed for the speedy adoption of such tight legislation. In particular, the long history of the bureaucracy and the formation of the MMT aided in increased public confidence in the government's crisis management capacity, notably as regards problems in the public health system. Indeed, without the support of the public (functional approach) that believes its government's right decisions and has learned to endure in the short-term in place of long-term advantages, such drastic reforms would have been difficult to be implemented without opposition or blame. Therefore, when making decisions, all the stakeholders need to be taken into consideration. As a result, the Singapore government's leadership approach affected the management of the dreaded coronavirus disease. Therefore, hypothesis one (Ho1) which was in line with research question one and stated that the Singapore government leadership approach did not affect the mitigation of the Covid-19 pandemic was not supported. This implies that from the review of this study, the Singapore government leadership approach actually mitigated the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic. Investigation from the researchers suggests that the Singapore government applied an all-inclusive functional leadership approach where all the stakeholders were involved in the fight against the dreaded disease. This finding supports the submission of von Eiff *et al.* (2021) and Wuthrich and Ingleby (2020) who emphasized team management leadership practice and the value-based leadership model in a study carried out in Germany during the Covid-19 pandemic where these leadership practices were used to address the fundamental leadership deficit in the healthcare sector. In like manner, this finding is in line with the opinion of Arden (2020) who stated that the New Zealand government urged her people to bond together to save lives by going home and checking in on their neighbors just to empathize with the families who lost their loved ones during the Covid-19 pandemic. The study concluded that the Singapore government applied a leadership approach (functional leadership) in curtailing the Covid-19 pandemic.

As previously stated, the appearance of infectious clusters among migrant workers in the construction industry has aroused some concerns regarding the government's response.

The government has consistently disseminated and informed the public via local news media issues relating to public health in a timely manner, in accordance with the circumstances met on the ground and related priorities set by the MMT; for instance, mass testing, the rapid separation of the dormitories of migrant workers and strict orders for workers to quarantine. Despite some of the flaws of the government, one early interesting observation is that, despite being a geographically small city government with a huge population, Singapore's mortality rate remains relatively low (0.0989% in Singapore) to that of many other nations (worldwide death rate was 6.99%) as early May 2020, a feat that earned them international recognition, according to WHO statistics (2020). This implies that the way the Singaporean government handled the Covid-19 outbreak served as a point of reference for other nations to follow. Following this, hypothesis two which corresponds to research question two and which stated that the Singapore leadership approach did not serve as a role-model status for other countries around the globe was also not supported. This line of argument aligns with the submission of *Khanna et al. (2020)* who averred that Singapore received remarkable global attention in the mainstream media in an effort to stop the early spread of Covid-19 brought in from China. *Woo (2020)* added that because of Singapore's effective handling of the Covid-19 outbreak, the WHO recognized Singapore as a reference point for crisis management. Therefore, the study concludes that the Singapore leadership approach serves as a role-model status for other countries around the globe.

## 5. Conclusions and recommendations

Lastly, it was the way Singapore handled the Covid-19 pandemic that resulted in the effective management of its crisis. The leadership dynamics at play were quite paramount to the eventual reduction in the rate of infection of Covid-19 among Singaporeans. The economy was kept running because the country only lockdown the economy briefly; it handled its resources properly and acted swiftly without rushing choices; controlling communication effectively through a variety of forums and instilling a high degree of confidence in the citizens who also, to a large extent, adhered to the policies, rules and regulations offered by their government during this period. In conclusion, Singapore has successfully combated the pandemic, balancing constraints with economic impact. There were, however, a number of rules and initiatives that may have been developed more successfully. For instance, the early stages of the epidemic may have been aided by the tardy implementation of a mandatory mask mandate due to a lack of available masks. Additionally, earlier travel restrictions might have reduced the number of imported cases that enter the neighborhood. However, due to the pandemic's developing nature, the government's capacity for adaptability and responsiveness to the most recent discoveries, whether regarding new varieties or elsewhere, ultimately determines the efficacy of these initiatives. Overall, the Singapore case gives a great lesson for individuals, businesses and societies to learn from.

Based on the statement above, and proffering solution to research question three, the following recommendations were suggested:

- (1) In making decisions, being proactive and timely is critical. That is, implementing the right leadership approach at the right time is tantamount to the successful achievement of a set objective. That is, in a crisis situation, applying contingency and functional management approaches is a prerequisite to success. Similarly, when making crucial decisions for government policy and corporate administration, all stakeholders must be considered.
- (2) Despite the fact that the pandemic is far from over and its long-term health and socioeconomic impacts are unknown, Singapore's experience demonstrates an important lesson for individuals, businesses and societies because the case can serve

as a learning path for them and the integrated strategic approaches by Singapore government are critical for long-term crisis management.

- (3) Government and business policymakers may devote more time to developing more conceivable and holistic crisis response plans through an integrated orientation that draws on experiences gained previously in world health emergencies, past and present mistakes, and other countries' fights with the deadly disease, researchers and front-line employees. They will be able to spot flaws in current plans, deploy the most effective ones faster and make modifications that will help them prepare for the next stage.
- (4) By making sure that leaders, managers and academics collaborate, institutional conditions that attract a good idea contestation may have drawn the attraction in debates on how some of the government challenges will be addressed.
- (5) Society and business management should be able to strike a balance between a challenging situation and the resources available to them when making decisions.
- (6) It is very important to pay attention to the citizens' thoughts and ideas during times of crisis and to build a genuine connection with them. Having honest and open conversations about ideas is extremely important for citizens and staff (in organizations) alike during a pandemic. Therefore, effective communication is of paramount importance.

## 6. Practical implication of the review

Although the pandemic is far from over, its long-term effects on public health and economic life are not known. The experience Singapore faced is a lesson for crisis management with individuals, businesses and societies alike. [Moynihan \(2008\)](#) posited that the appropriate action is taken when crises make learning difficult. Consequently, policymakers, scholars and frontline workers may have sufficient reason to devote time to developing a more viable, comprehensive crisis response plan by pursuing an integrated learning strategy (stakeholder approach), drawing on past experiences in dealing with global health emergencies and prevailing mistakes. This enables them to detect the weak links in current plans and deploy the most effective ones more rapidly, as well as make improvements that enhanced the preparation for the next stage. Simultaneously, by guaranteeing that leaders, business officials and academics work together, institutional conditions that enable robust idea contestation may have gained some value in disputes over how to tackle some of the government/business' difficulties.

Finally, one could argue that Singapore's success stems from the government's proactive rather than reactive strategy to the virus (contingency approach), the collective beliefs of the stakeholders in the government, and the balance between complete collapse and infection control, unlike some other countries, such as New Zealand, which presumed that strict controls (force) should be applied from the start.

## 7. Suggestions for future research

This study has some limitations which allow for suggestions for further study. For instance, the focus of the study is also restricted to leadership dynamics and how it affects Covid-19 pandemic prevention in Singapore. It is important to conduct further research on how leadership may help other nations around the world to reduce the consequences of the Covid-19 epidemic. This should make it possible to establish a more thorough understanding

of the leadership positions and skills that can be developed and used to handle pandemics and other crises both in organizations and communities in the future. Finally, to respond to the research questions and reach the study conclusions, this study used a qualitative comparative review. The use of cross-sectional design and quantitative analysis in achieving the same conclusion can be explored in further studies.

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