



Leading renewal in crisis: The role of the middle- manager in high- autonomy work contexts

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Focus of our research: With global risks on the rise, there is a practical, and scholarly interest to better understand the characteristics of leadership in effectively dealing with crises, so that teams and organizations can 'bounce back' from crisis

- ▶ A crisis always increases uncertainty, and in uncertain times, people rely more on the psychological support provided by a leader than in normal situations (Rudolph et al., 2021).
- ▶ Responding to an unusual crisis event is different from everyday leadership, which poses a challenge for organizational leaders (Collins et al., 2022). Most leaders were not prepared to handle the COVID-19 crisis (Crayne & Medeiros, 2021), which created an ongoing scholarly interest to better understand the characteristics and role of leadership in effectively dealing with crises (Collins et al., 2022).
- ▶ In new and unexpected situations, existing problem-solving methods may no longer be effective. Prior organizational crisis literature recognizes the opportunity of learning from a crisis (e.g., Berglund et al., 2024; Meisiek & Stanway, 2023; Müller-Seitz & Macpherson, 2014; Smith & Elliott, 2007).
- ▶ While a crisis may threaten the survival of organizations and individuals and come without warning (Collins et al., 2022), a crisis can trigger new learning needs and increase people's motivation and capacity to learn (Bundy et al., 2017).



Methods: We conducted a qualitative study to investigate leadership in crisis from the perspective of enabling long-term renewal (i.e., ongoing learning, and the creation of innovative approaches or work practices)

Participants

- ▶ 37 informants in total
- ▶ Interview sample: 26 teachers and supervisors; 21 female, 5 male; five organizations, seven teams, three educational levels (basic, secondary and higher) in Finland
- ▶ Workshop sample: 11 experts; 7 female, 4 male; representing a range of educational entities in Finland (e.g., ministry, national agency, municipality...)

Data collection

- ▶ 1:1 interviews: Nov 2023 - Mar 2024
 - ▶ Focus on how teachers and supervisors experience external crises in their work, and how they operate in these situations
- ▶ Group workshops: April 2024
 - ▶ Focus on current challenges and needs within the education sector crisis context

Data analysis

- ▶ The data for analysis consists of information from 26 interviews (n=26) and two workshops (n=11).
- ▶ Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006)
 - ▶ Creating representative themes that best capture the meaning of the observations



Findings: Examples from our data

The interviewed teachers and supervisors discussed numerous external crises that they viewed could impact the education sector.

*Certainly, this **COVID-19 crisis** is the worst kind of crisis that has significantly impacted many aspects of organizing, maintaining, and implementing education. (E1l, leader interviewee)*

*Teaching resources have been **cut**. ... The standard shouldn't be lowered, but we have to achieve it with fewer resources. ... You could roughly say that every time there are cuts, it means taking on one more course. In that sense, it has led to **fewer resources** per course or module, but it also fragments and scatters the use of time more and more. (F2t, teacher interviewee)*

*It is that kind of frightening thing, wondering what will happen next. The threat, the threat of a larger, expanded **war**, still looms in the air. (C4t, teacher interviewee)*

*I have been heavily involved in student admissions and interviews, and we definitely notice that the number has decreased... it's clear that there aren't nearly as many applicants. There just isn't the same population to choose from as before. This raises concerns about the **future of this field**. (E3t, teacher interviewee)*



Findings: Examples from our data

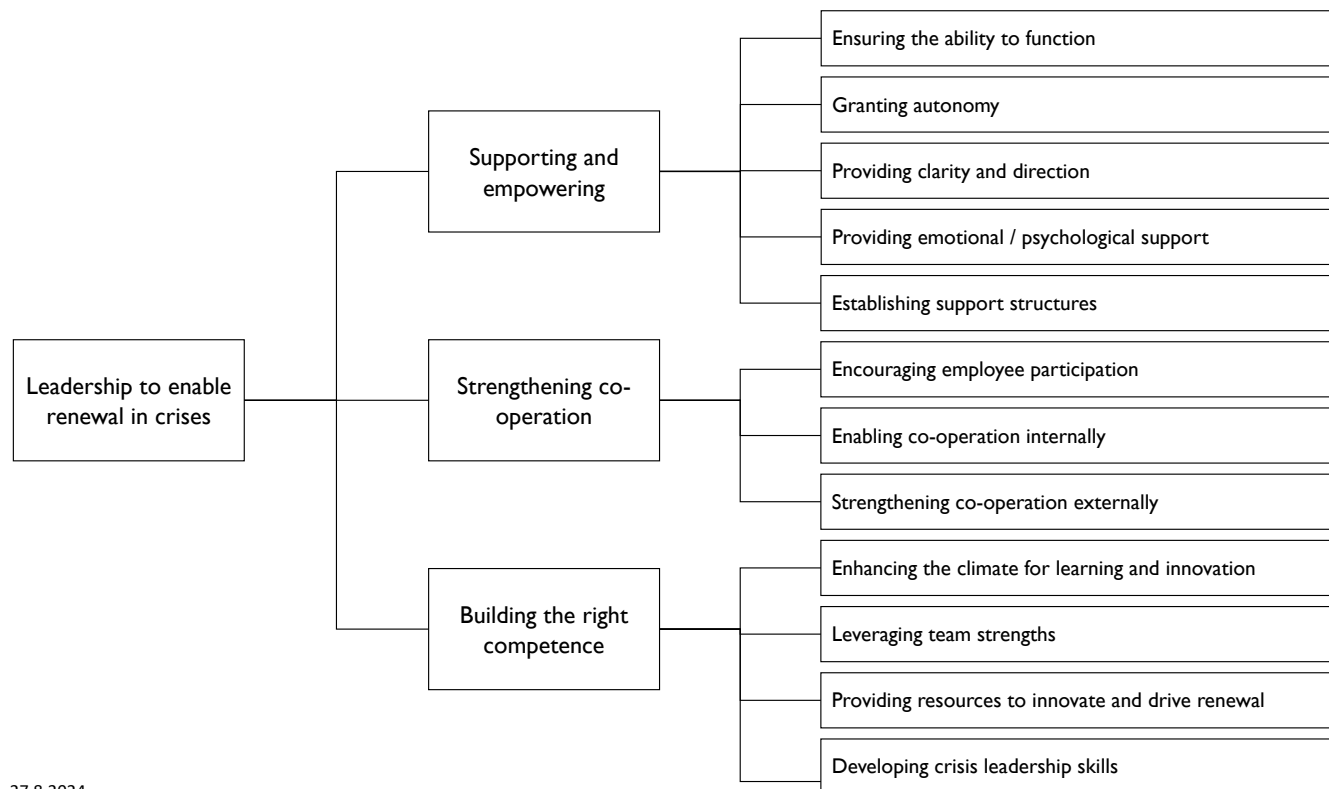
Expectations for effective leadership in crises were reported in the teacher and supervisor interviews, and the workshops with experts representing the education sector more broadly.

*And I'm trying to build it so that within our team, there's never just one person who handles something, but rather several, so that we're not vulnerable in that regard... It actually applies to everything. We're vulnerable if some **knowledge, skill,** or task relies solely on one person. Be it any crisis. And that's what I want for our team: not to be vulnerable. (F1I, leader interviewee)*

***Involve the team in all activities.** Even if you make the decision yourself, first assess and listen to the team. This fosters understanding, and if there are ever unpleasant decisions, the team will understand why. If decisions come out of the blue without any prior information, the reception is likely to be much more negative. (F2t, teacher interviewee)*

*Responsible **autonomy** (committed to community goals and methods) usually supports the goals of the entire community, but autonomy that isn't committed to common goals is often divisive. (W1_8, workshop participant)*

Findings: We organized the observations into themes and developed a thematic framework to illustrate what kind of a leadership role a middle-manager may take to enable renewal amidst crisis in a high-autonomy context



Implications for theory and practice

- ▶ Our study contributes to organizational crisis leadership and education management literatures.
 - ▶ Based on the qualitative evidence, we developed a framework for crisis leadership that fosters renewal and innovation through empowering autonomy, strengthening the community, and building the right competence.
 - ▶ We discuss the role of effective leadership in responding to long-term consequences of crises in high-autonomy expert work settings.
 - ▶ Our study debates the expert employee's autonomy in developing their work practices in a crisis context.
 - ▶ This study also integrates the internal and external perspectives to organizational crisis by demonstrating the importance of collaborating with both internal and external stakeholders for postcrisis learning and innovation.
 - ▶ We make recommendations for practice that can support organizational crisis leadership and help teams 'bounce back' (e.g., each individual should be encouraged to identify the core tasks within one's work and to ensure their execution even in crisis situations)
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- ▶ *Open questions: Framing (and publication outlet)?*
 - ▶ Leadership OR
 - ▶ Management education





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Thank You!

Questions? Comments?

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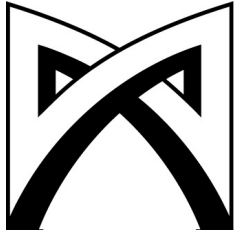
27.8.2024



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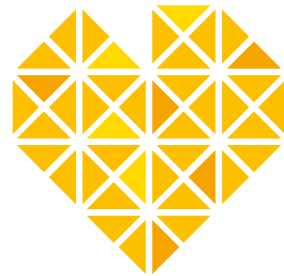
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