

Full Length Research Paper

Leadership characteristics in a volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (VUCA) environment, a case study of Zimbabwe hospitality industry during Covid 19 era

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Organisations are experiencing high level of uncertainty due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The study sought to evaluate the leadership characteristics in a Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity (VUCA) environment in the hospitality industry during Covid 19 era. There is lack of research that explains challenges faced in the presence of a Covid 19 pandemic in the hospitality sector in Zimbabwe. This generates a need to identify various leadership characteristics in the hospitality sector in the context of a pandemic environment. The research used both quantitative and qualitative approaches to explore the topic under study utilising both primary and secondary data. Questionnaires and interviews were used as part of the data gathering instruments for primary data. Random and non-random sampling techniques were used to obtain data from participants who are employees of hotels in Zimbabwe. While for secondary data, documentary analysis of previous research done by other scholars, media circulations, internal circulars were used. Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the data obtained from the respondents. Use of SPSS for quantitative and Nvivo for qualitative data analyse were used, with correlation and regression analysis applied to evaluate the relationship between the preparedness and survival in the VUCA environment. The major findings of the study revealed that Zimbabwe's hospitality industry is in Covid 19 induced VUCA Environment. The study established that possession of certain skills-set coupled with preparation enhance chances of an organisation's survival in a VUCA. The study recommended the need to invest trainings of leadership personnel on critical skills.

Key words: VUCA, COVID-19, Pandemic, Disruptive technology, Hospitality industry.

INTRODUCTION

Leaders of organisations in the 21st century are faced with a dynamic and profound change that is unprecedented with the acceleration, intensity and frequency of change rising rapidly to produce volatile,

uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) operating environments (Rimita, 2019). VUCA refers to an operating environment that is constantly changing in conflicting, dramatic, and relentless ways to produce

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leadership and organizational challenges (Deaton, 2018). Covid 19 (corona virus disease 2019 according to World Health Organization (WHO)) era is one of the greatest examples of VUCA environment. The hospitality industry has been heavily hit by the corona Covid-19 pandemic with potential shock ranging between a 60-80% drop in the international tourism economy in 2020.

Hospitality industry in Zimbabwe experienced a drastic set back as a result of Covid 19, causing downsizing through either closure of some hotels or wings, retrenchments and in some cases death. The industry is a beneficiary of international tourists, whose travel was marred by worldwide lockdowns and restrictions. The study seeks to evaluate the effects of leadership characteristics during VUCA environment as case study of hospitality industry in Zimbabwe during Covid 19 era to organisation and its stakeholders. Great leaders possess clarity, decisiveness, courage, passion and humility. The study elucidates how leaders of hospitality industry manage the existence of the pandemic across all faculties of the business, their preparedness, how to counter the effects and observation of keys learnings arising thereof.

The main research objective of the study is to evaluate leadership characteristics in Covid 19 related VUCA environment relating to hospitality and tourism industry.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The chapter seeks to review relevant literature that provided a foundation for understanding the VUCA environment with particular reference to Covid 19 in hospitality industry. However, merely understanding the current and expected future state of VUCA will not prepare leaders to effectively meet business concerns but rather focusing on opportunities and harnessing new leadership capabilities is critical for future leadership success. In order to stay ahead of constantly changing conditions brought about by pandemics and respond effectively to shifting expectations, leaders must bridge the skills gap between their current capabilities and the skills needed to achieve goals. While the Covid-19 pandemic has dealt the hospitality industry and the academia with uncharted challenges, it also presents great research opportunities for hospitality scholars. The magnitude of this crisis and its devastating effects on operations, employees, and customers are unrivalled compared to previous pandemics and other crises. Whilst using previous conceptual and theoretical frameworks may benefit future research, it is critical to generate new knowledge that can provide insight to the industry about how to transform their operations due to Covid-19 pandemic.

This review will benefit from textbooks and articles published by peer-reviewed journals in the areas of strategy, leadership, organizational behaviour, learning, and industrial psychology, as well as the perspective of

well-respected business authors. This section of the study will also highlight where they are weaknesses, gaps, or areas needing further study. Doheny et al. (2012) posit that in numerous industries a mounting surge of volatility, uncertainty and business complexity is agitating markets and altering the nature of competition.

Following the Covid-19 pandemic, the hospitality industry has become a replica of the VUCA world and is providing innovative exhilarating and inspiring opportunities for business leaders to showcase their leadership qualities (Walch et al. 2014). Leaders today are continually challenged to be agile enough to rapidly respond to a frequently changing business environment (Aberdeen Group, 2012). Understanding and then reframing VUCA dangers into opportunities of vision, understanding, clarity and agility, is necessary in order for leaders to be positive change agents in the midst of constant chaos (Johansen, 2009, 2022). Fortune magazine business analyst, Geoff Colvin shared, "when people don't know what's going to happen, they freeze" (Colvin, 2010). This phenomenon is known as uncertainty paralyses (McCarty, 2011) and leads to indecision and inaction. McCarty (2011) proposes that leaders must strengthen skills and strategies that combat the VUCA dangers to keep a leader viable, creative, and adaptable. Concurring, Johansen (2009) describes the VUCA environment as constantly expanding and evolving.

In crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the detailed pre-planning by organizations and their leaders, although prudent, cannot mitigate every potential crisis element (Drabek and McEntire, 2003) widely used and accepted practices and measures of leadership may not adequately capture the needs of leadership in the context of crisis (Haddon et al., 2015). Many organizations operate in a state of imbalance between order and disorder, and that place is called the edge of chaos (Hunt et al., 2007; McDaniel, 1997). This boundary is a transition zone that nears a disorderly, imbalanced state of volatility and ambiguity, poised at the boundary of order, but requiring constant adjustment to rapidly changing systems (Hunt et al., 2007). VUCA is described within the context of dangers and opportunities. He went on to describe the VUCA world as a world filled with both dangers and opportunities (Johansen, 2009, 2022).

Volatility, also referred to as instability, refers to the dynamic quality of the context for decision making and the degree of turbulence or rate of change (Hesselbein and Goldsmith, 2009; Paparone and Topic, 2011; Shaffer and Zalewski, 2011).

Uncertainty is "a term used to describe a situation characterized by a lack of knowledge not as to cause and effect but rather pertaining to whether a certain event is significant enough to constitute a meaningful cause" (Bennett and Lemoine, 2014). Furthermore, in uncertainty, major disruptive changes occur frequently and there is a lack of predictability in issues and events (Lawrence, 2013, p. 5; Sullivan, 2012). Leaders must be able to communicate with different levels and functions within the

organisation and reach out with their vision. The leader must understand and this is done by listening, be present and see what is going on; stop, look and listen (Lawrence, 2013; Kinsinger and Walch, 2012).

Complexity refers to the many moving parts, their iterations, and the multiplicity of actors in any given situation causing chaos, confusion, and a lack of mastering the intricacies to formulate cohesive responses (Codreanu, 2016; Johansen and Euchner, 2013). According to Shaffer and Zalewski (2011), complexity refers to the fact that causal factors or social forces at work in the situation are often competing with one another. In complex business environments, simple patterns combine and interconnect in multiple ways that result in disruptions, convolutions, and information overload (Bartscht, 2015; Cousins, 2018; Heinonen et al., 2017).

Ambiguity refers to the unknown significance of one or more factors in a situation (Shaffer and Zalewski, 2011). The meaning of an event is unclear and nature of cause and effect relationships is doubtful in ambiguity situation (Bennett and Lemoine, 2014; Lawrence, 2013). An ambiguous situation typically revolves around a new product, innovation, market or opportunity. In an ambiguous environment the situation cannot be solved through a predefined number of steps or processes due to lack of clarity. Different people may have different angles on how to solve a problem and no answer it better than the other (Mack et. al., 2015).

Leadership Theories in a VUCA environment, according to Bolden et al. (2003) includes:

1. Situational leadership: this is a leadership theory underlined by the belief that there is no one most effective, and that the best leaders adapt their leadership style to suit the task, people or project at hand. It was developed by Professor Paul Hersey and Ken Blanchard in the 1970s, originally conceived as the 'life cycle theory of leadership', (Stiehm, 2002; Codreanu, 2016).
2. Transformational leaders: these guide followers through inspiration and motivation. Over the last few years, researchers have focused on transformational leadership as a being an effective leadership strategy to implement within public and private sector organizations (Hassan and Hatmaker, 2015). Transformational leaders work with their employees to implement change.

The Situational and transformational leadership theories is an important lens for this study, as they guided the review and analysis of leadership characteristics in VUCA and VUCA-readiness using this tripartite leadership framework.

Literature gap analysis

The study fills a literature gap by identifying and bringing to the fore the leadership characteristics that are

necessary during the VUCA environment, applicable in the hospitality sector in Zimbabwe in this case as a result of Covid 19 pandemic. Other scholars have researched on the effects of the pandemic in tourism sectors around the globe. A study carried out by Nangia and Mohsin (2020), attempted to discuss the identifying VUCA factors in a pandemic era – a framework focused on Indian IT industry and research on tourism after corona: impacts of Covid 19 pandemic and way forward for tourism, hotel and mice industry in Sri Lanka by Ruwan Ranasinghe, et al. However, their findings are very did not cater for the hospitality industry in Zimbabwe. Therefore this study aims to contribute in filling this research gap. A study by Mhlanga et al, centred on the "Socio-economic Implications of the COVID-19 for Smallholder Livelihoods in Zimbabwe" The article concludes that social assistance should now be intensified to protect its vulnerable population from the ravages of COVID-19.(Mhlanga and Moloji, 2020).

METHODOLOGY

The research philosophy used was the pragmatism which is a combination of the positivism and interpretivism philosophies. Collis and Hussey (2009) as well as Rubin and Babbie (2013) suggested that the goal in pragmatism is to understand, interpret events, experiences and social structures as well as the values people attach to these phenomena. Positivism asserts that the world consists of social order (ontology) and the best way to study the world is through an objective approach (epistemology). Two sets of primary data collection tools were used, a self-administered questionnaire for the staff members and guides interview for the executives, giving room for explanation of necessary information, facts and phrases relating to the effects and mitigating factors on Covid 19 induced VUCA. Reliability and validity checks and balances were carried out. Key in the research was the consideration of ethics and confidentiality. SPSS for quantitative data and Nvivo for qualitative data) were carefully considered to ensure the trustworthiness of the study.

This study will employ a descriptive cross-sectional survey design with both quantitative and qualitative data collection tools. A cross-sectional survey based on a single examination of a cross-section of population from different participants from leading organizations in the hospitality industry in Zimbabwe will be employed. Additionally, high reliability will be easy to obtain by presenting all subjects with a standardized stimulus which ensures that observer subjectivity is greatly eliminated. The design will give guidance to the researcher in the analysis of observations, and drawing of inferences of the collected data. Furthermore, the design provides the researcher the methodical structure that will logically be implemented in order to execute the research since the design detailed the plan of how the research is to be carried out. Usage of cross-sectional descriptive survey design, will not only help to anticipate and specify the seemingly countless decisions connected with planning and carrying out data collection, processing and analyzing it, but it also presented a local basis for these decisions (Yin, 2003).

Delimitations

Though there are a number of impacts associated with leadership characteristics in VUCA, this research focussed on the Zimbabwe

hospitality industry during Covid 19 era, with help of WHO, Ministry of Health Child Welfare in Zimbabwe and various stakeholders.

Limitations

The sensitivity of this study also poses a limitation in that participants (hotel management) may be not forthcoming with helpful answers. However, assurance that all acquired data would be handled confidentially with confidentiality and pledged to encourage provision of relevant and factual information.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To ensure that the analysis was undertaken in a systematic manner, an analysis plan was created first. Results were analysed using a variety of statistical methods ranging from simple graphing to the use of statistics. These helped to enable analysis of relationships of a number of independent variables, controlling other factors, including analysis. The data was presented using descriptive statistics where possible. The researcher used Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for analysing quantitative data and Nvivo data analysis for qualitative primary data collected. This process includes identifying similar words and relationships between cases (respondents) as well as identifying similarities and differences between them.

This represents a synthesis of responses that were elicited through the data collection tools. The findings have been presented in a narrative form. Nvivo clouding was used to identify the most frequently used word. Study of demographics was done to assess the understanding, results of which established that the majority of the employees in the hospitality industry are in the age bands of 41- 50 years giving credence to their responses as they were responding from an informed position. As for average length of service in hospitality industry, a total of 51 respondents representing 37% have worked in the hospitality industry for between 15-20 years, whilst 34 representing 25%, between 11-15 years. This shows that the respondents experience is considerably adequate to note changes or lack thereof brought by the VUCA environment.

Research results indicated that most of the executives had common understanding of the VUCA environment as depicted by the most commonly used words like unpredictable, challenges, and extreme, critical, complex and ambiguous. They were in agreement that there are certain characteristics critical in surviving the VUCA environment, these includes good communication skills, open mindedness, dynamism, flexibility, agility, adaptive, considerate, formulating strategies, cognitive and must be informed. The test of Normality was carried out showing that the responses for the hospitality industry were skewed as shown by both the Kolmogorov-Smirnov p and the Shapiro-Wilk p-values which were both 0.00 (Figure 1). Such results resulted as the majority of the

respondents were of the view that certain skills-set impacts positively an organisation during this Covid 19 era.

In assessing preparedness of leadership in VUCA, there was need to check how Covid 19 had altered the hospitality industry. As such the majority of the respondents were in agreement that Covid 19 had induced a VUCA in the hospitality industry as 53 strongly agreed and 41 agreed of the 138 respondents, representing 68% of the respondents being in agreement that Covid 19 has caused a VUCA (Figure 2). On further probing on the leaders during interviews why there is a 12.3% of respondents who feel Covid 19 has no effect it was reviewed that most people in the hospitality industry are of the opinion that it is the deterioration of the economy which has caused challenges in the industry.

Correlation analysis

It can be observed that there is a strong positive relationship by virtue of the Pearson correlation coefficient, which had a value of 0.78 (Table 1). The more prepared the organisation was the better and more effective the strategies used to survive as evidenced by having the strategies being embraced by the employees. Also a Sig. value of 0.041, a value less than 0.05 shows that for the above two variables they is a statistically significant correlation. Conduct of regress analysis was conducted in SPSS.

Regression analysis

The R-value of 0.78 shows that there is a strong positive relationship between the variables and an R squared value of 0.608 indicates that 60.8% of the extent of how being prepared enhanced chances of surviving a Covid 19 induced VUCA environment. There is a link between being prepared and surviving a VUCA environment.

Regression coefficients results show that when there is no preparation, which is when its effect is zero, the likelihood of surviving will be at a value of 2.381 and that for every unit increase in preparation the chances of surviving will be enhance by a factor of 0.238. A Sig value of 0.034 which is less than the alpha value (0.05) shows that the underlying hypothesis which states that the variables are independent is violated and thus we reject it and retain the alternative hypothesis which states that the two variables are associated to each other.

ANOVA analysis shows that the p-value is less than the alpha value(0.05) hence we reject the null hypothesis in favour of the alternative hypothesis, that is they is some association between being prepared and surviving VUCA. Most executives agreed to the notion of diversification, reconfigure/ restructure business, closing some wings, or branches to survive thereby segmenting

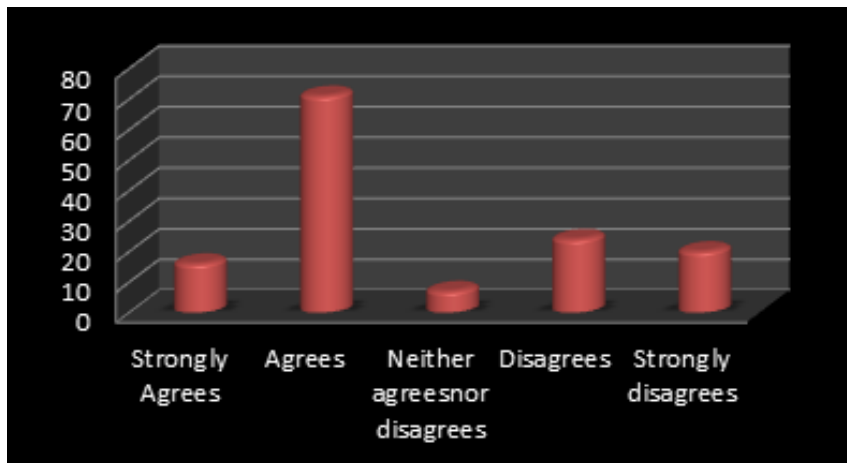


Figure 1. Histogram on normality of data.

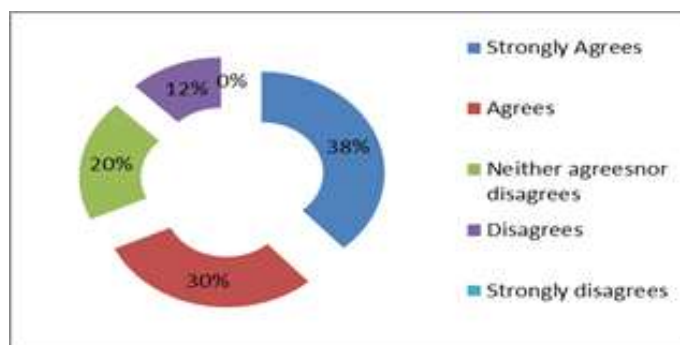


Figure 2. Management preparedness to Covid 19 pandemic.

Table 1. Predictors: (Constant), To what extent does being prepared help to survive in a VUCA environment.

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	0.078 ^a	0.608	0.579	0.852

businesses and stay connected to the international arena. Covid 19 caused losses, low volumes, closure of hotels, staff cutting, adverse effect on revenues, death of staff and catastrophic pandemic. Experiences important in operating during VUCA- being proactive, impact on costs, downsizing, availability of opportunities, loyalty to guest and staff, and intelligence, correct procurement and change. Successful strategies implemented during Covid 19 include downsizing, closing some of the business units, adapting to the environment, align and contain costs to revenues, following guidelines, staff connected were the common sentiments from the executives. Leader must be game changers, must possess skills necessary to foster business ahead, need for continuous

training, versatile, be able to detect the storms and make corrective decision.

Conclusions

The study concludes that there are some skills-set that have a positive impact in terms of surviving a VUCA environment induced by Covid 19, applying certain skills which help in navigating a VUCA. Consequently, current and future leaders are compelled to develop and cultivate new skills to keep pace with landscapes that are volatile and ambiguous. Leaders must therefore strengthen skills and strategies that combat the VUCA dangers. Although

the hospitality is becoming challenging to lead during and after the pandemic, it is also rife with unique and innovative opportunities for those who are able to identify and exploit such waves of disruption. It can also be concluded that leadership involves managing and guiding staff during change, especially in a rapidly iterating landscape, leaders are faced with a multitude of challenges. Leaders provide guidance and motivation during such uncertain times. This calls for leaders to be prepared and be able to craft strategies that instills confidence on the workforce and also ensures survival during VUCA periods, leaders in the hospitality industry need to have ad hoc capabilities with the ability to improvise, communicate, respond to and develop new norms, and make rapid, on-the-spot decisions. The entire system requires consistent adaptation and agility in order to be responsive to the unpredictability in the change that is occurring. The link between preparedness for VUCA ecosystems and being able to craft strategies for survival which are agreeable to the employees who also participate in the success of the business was also highlighted in the study where it was established that there is a positive relationship between the two. Conversely challenges or lack of preparedness for any eventuality spell challenges in terms survival and support from subordinates. To take on this century's great challenges, leaders must not only look at the world and its systems holistically, they must also identify and understand how to lead effectively in this new volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous world (Brilliant, 2013). Fundamental shift on leadership values is necessary always, to counter the effects of pandemic and other VUCA impurities. Being decisive, bold actions may conform to stereotypes of what strong leaders should do. However in complex, rapidly changing situations with high risk and information is limited, this style is far inferior to one based on thoughtful decisions made carefully with humility and constant awareness of the unknown.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Hotels need to invest more in workshops and trainings of leadership personnel to acquire and improve on critical skills in business such as agility, flexibility, decisiveness amongst others. Leaders must embrace the challenges that have been and being brought by Covid 19, as it is the new normal characterised by disruptive technologies. As it stands then Covid 19 pandemic is not going anywhere sooner and evidenced by the new wave that affected the globe after the research period. The business (hospitality) must not completely shut down; rather find ways to mitigate cost effectiveness. Leaders must be highly innovative, thereby looking into ways to stay afloat and survive. Leaders must reevaluate strategies along with disruptive technology. Leaders must find new ways of moving with the trend, like what other businesses are doing, that is, trading/transacting online,

with hotel guest booking online, automatic check in. Leaders must protect their subordinates/staff and guests by following WHO guidelines and policies, among others such as washing of hands with soap and running water, sanitation, social distance and wearing of mask. Protection of employees also comes in as welfare, rather than retrenching, assign other staff members to thriving subsidiaries, and pay them from the investments. The government in turn also must provide a favourable environment for the industry to survive in the pandemic, although through stringent measure such as testing and vaccinations. The community is affected especially when there is high unemployment, unprocedural disposal of Covid kits. Therefore leaders in hospitality industry must ensure that that all are taken into account, through possessing characteristics that help stabilise staff welfare and community safety.

AREAS OF FURTHER RESEARCH

There is a need to study the aftermath of Covid 19 and its associated consequences, and the reaction of leaders in Hospitality.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors have not declared any conflict of interest.

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