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STANDING ALONE TOGETHER: MANAGING THE PARADOX



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PRAKATA

Di kesempatan ini saya ingin memanjatkan kesyukuran kerana dengan izinNya pihak penulis daripada Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS) khususnya daripada Fakulti Sains Kognitif dan Pembangunan Manusia (FSKPM) mampu menyiapkan penulisan bab masing-masing dengan jayanya. Terima kasih kepada barisan pensyarah yang menyumbang hasil karya atau penulisan akademik mereka bagi tajuk khusus yang menjadi bidang penyelidikan dan kepakaran masing-masing. Semoga tulisan sarjana dalam bidang kepakaran ini dapat menyumbang kepada pembentukan dan pengembangan idea baru bagi tajuk yang dipilih berdasarkan sudut pandangan ilmu akademik yang berkaitan dan dapat dikaitkan pula dengan isu semasa yang terkini iaitu COVID-19 dan kesan serta impak langsung atau tidak langsung yang berkaitan. Atas kerja keras berterusan dan tanpa mengenal penat lelah, sumbangan ini sesungguhnya sangat berguna untuk pembinaan tradisi keilmuan dan pembinaan peradaban sejagat.

Penulisan bab dalam buku ini dibuat sempena *International Counselling Convention 2022 (ICC2022)* yang diadakan di Riverside Majestic Hotel, Kuching, Sarawak, Malaysia pada 1 hingga 4 November 2022. Jutaan terima kasih khususnya kepada pihak Urusetia ICC2022 UNIMAS kerana memberikan ruang dan peluang untuk ahli akademik di UNIMAS dan pihak lain yang berminat untuk menulis bab berkaitan dan maka akhirnya terhasil lah sebuah buku yang bertajuk, "*Standing Alone Together: Managing the Paradox*". Buku ini merupakan gabungan idea dan buah fikiran semua penulis terlibat dalam menangani permasalahan masyarakat yang wujud akibat munculnya krisis besar kesihatan yang berlaku di dunia pada abad ke-21 iaitu COVID-19. Buku ini ditulis dalam dwibahasa dimana lima bab yang pertama ditulis dalam bahasa Inggeris dan bab seterusnya dalam Bahasa Melayu. Bukan mudah tugas yang nampaknya kecil untuk menyumbangkan satu bab ini dan sebagai impak besarnya terbitnya himpunan 18 bab yang setiap satunya mempunyai citra dan nilai tersendiri dari perspektif ilmu berkaitan dalam menghubungkan dan menghuraikan isu berkaitan dengan paradok yang muncul iaitu COVID-19 dan serta impak daripadanya.

Alhamdulillah, setelah melalui beberapa proses penulisan ilmiah, maka terhasil lah sebuah bab. Bab-bab yang dari pelbagai disiplin ilmu berkaitan isu pengurusan, kemasyarakatan dan kemanusiaan ini dikumpulkan dan menjadi sebuah buku yang mempunyai pelbagai tajuk. Inti pati penulisan yang berasaskan teori, kerangka umum, pengalaman sebenar, praktis semasa serta testimoni diri ini diharap dapat menjadi salah satu bacaan umum kepada pembaca. Diharap buku ini sesuai untuk dijadikan bahan rujukan dan bacaan ilmiah bagi bidang yang berkaitan pengurusan, kemasyarakatan dan memberikan impak terhadap diri, keluarga, masyarakat serta negara ketika berdepan situasi pandemik COVID-19.

Saya berharap budaya menulis sama ada artikel, bab, buku dan apa – apa catatan bertulis dalam karya popular, penulisan separa akademik dan penulisan akademik penuh (jurnal akademik dan buku ilmiah) perlu disemarakkan dalam kalangan masyarakat Malaysia. Tradisi keilmuan ini perlu dimulakan oleh ahli akademik dan rakyat Malaysia yang lain. Bahan penulisan yang ingin dikongsikan itu pastinya mempunyai manfaat, kebaikan atau dapat menjadi penunjuk jalan atau titik asas kepada pemupukan budaya membaca yang lebih serius dalam kalangan masyarakat Malaysia. Keluarga besar Malaysia pada abad ke-21 ini perlu disajikan bukan sahaja dengan bacaan dalam bentuk buku bercetak tetapi bahan lain dalam bentuk elektronik seperti *eBook* dan lain-lain. Sesuai dengan peredaran semasa dan generasi milenial yang lebih berorientasi dan mesra teknologi maklumat, penulisan atau pengeluaran mekanisme bacaan yang berbantuan komputer dan internet perlu diberi perhatian utama. Diharap agar semua rakyat Malaysia mampu untuk menyumbang sesuatu bahan atau idea atau petua yang berguna dalam genre yang berbeza dan seterusnya dapat menyumbang kepada pembentukan masyarakat Malaysia yang bermaklumat dan berpengetahuan luas. Dengan ilmu di dada yang ada pada rakyat dan keluarga besar Malaysia, negara merdeka ini sudah tentu mampu untuk duduk sama rendah dan berdiri sama tinggi dengan seluruh negara dan bangsa lain yang bergelar negara maju.

Orang bijak pandai pernah berbicara *'The journey of thousand miles, start with a single step'*. Bagi tujuan itu keperluan untuk membaca adalah wajib bagi semua rakyat Malaysia. Hal ini selari dengan gagasan besar dalam Prinsip Rukun Negara iaitu Kepercayaan kepada Tuhan. Gesaan membaca dan menuntut ilmu pula disuruh atau diminta oleh seluruh agama besar dunia dan agama-agama lain yang muncul. Rakyat Malaysia yang bertuhan

mesti patuh dan taat pada perintah Tuhan masing-masing. Lantaran itu, moga buku ini dan penulisan lain yang akan wujud dalam pelbagai bentuk dan media perlu disokong keberadaannya. Diharap inisiatif penulisan bab dalam buku sempena ICC2022 ini mampu memberi ruang kepada penambahan bacaan bagi Keluarga keluarga besar Malaysia yang dahagakan ilmu pengetahuan.

'Bangsa membaca, bangsa yang mulia'

Selamat membaca dan terima kasih.

PROFESOR DR HAJI RUSLI BIN HAJI AHMAD

Ketua Editor

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PENGHARGAAN

Alhamdulillah, segala puji dan syukur ke hadrat Ilahi kerana dengan limpah dan kurnia-Nya buku *'Standing Alone Together: Managing the Paradox'* dapat disempurnakan dengan jayanya. Penulisan buku ini adalah himpunan dari bab-bab secara individu yang ditulis oleh barisan staf akademik dari Fakulti Sains Kognitif dan Pembangunan Manusia serta beberapa penulis lain. Penulisan buku ini merupakan inisiatif mulia dan kena pada tempatnya yang dibuat oleh Urusetia *International Counselling Convention 2022 (ICC2022)* yang diadakan di Riverside Majestic Hotel, Kuching, Sarawak, Malaysia pada 1 hingga 4 November 2022. Tahniah dan terima kasih pada semua pihak yang terlibat bagi penganjuran ICC2022. Pihak PERKAMA International berasa sangat berbangga dengan penganjuran konvensyen ini dan dapat ikut serta sebagai rakan penganjur utama bersama rakan penganjur yang lain. Jaringan pintar sebeginilah yang diharapkan dapat membawa kita semua dan Negara Malaysia ke arah kecemerlangan.

Sungguh kita sedia maklum bahawa usaha memperbanyakkan bahan bacaan kepada masyarakat adalah menjadi satu kegiatan penting bagi ahli akademik di universiti. Penulisan buku di bumi kenyalang ini pula perlu diberikan perhatian dan disemarakkan lagi. Usaha ini juga amat penting untuk memastikan rakyat negeri Sarawak mempunyai ilmu pengetahuan, kemahiran, keupayaan (sikap dan bakat) serta kompetensi lain dalam menyediakan diri mereka untuk menjadi rakyat yang bertanggungjawab dan dapat menyumbang kepada pembangunan Negeri Sarawak. Diharap cita-cita Sarawak untuk menjadi sebuah Negeri Maju dan Sejahtera pada tahun 2030 akan dapat dicapai dengan berkesan melalui amalan membaca yang tinggi dalam kalangan masyarakat.

Diharapkan dengan adanya buku-buku dan pelbagai bahan bacaan ini mampu membawa suatu perubahan yang lebih baik dan positif dalam meningkatkan kualiti dan kuantiti bahan bacaan di Bumi Kenyalang ini. Tambahan pula, dengan adanya usaha ini diharap pensyarah dan penulis dapat berkongsi ilmu pengetahuan, kepakaran, pengalaman dan detik-detik berharga dalam kerjaya dan bidang pengkhususan masing-masing kepada masyarakat.

Sekalung tahniah dan ucapan terima kasih diucapkan kepada semua pihak yang bertungkus lumus dalam penyediaan buku ini dan semoga sumbangan anda akan menjadi ilmu yang bermanfaat yang dapat membawa kebaikan kepada semua pihak. Kerjasama yang ditunjukkan dalam menyediakan buku ini adalah melibatkan koordinasi dan persefahaman daripada pelbagai pihak iaitu sidang editor, barisan penulis, pihak penilai, perunding yang dilantik, pihak penerbit dan pihak-pihak lain yang berkaitan. Hasil dari kerjasama dan usaha mengembleng tenaga ini, lahirlah sebuah karya yang dapat menambahkan lagi kerangka pengetahuan kita tentang kesan COVID-19 pada bidang-bidang yang terlibat serta kaedah dan tatacara sebenar dalam menangani isu besar kesihatan yang memberi impak besar kepada setiap individu. Diharap dasar-dasar, peraturan dan garis panduan terbaik dalam menangani perkara yang berbangkit dari setiap perspektif ilmu dapat menjadi bahan berharga untuk menghadapi krisis kesihatan sedia ada dan krisis kesihatan lain yang akan timbul. Bagi kumpulan pengamal pula, melalui perkongsian sebenar mereka dapat mengaplikasikan hal berkenaan dalam konteks pekerjaan dan penglibatan mereka semasa berdepan dengan masyarakat.

Sesuai dengan nama buku *"Standing Alone Together: Managing the Paradox"* saya menyeru untuk semua kita bersama-sama mengikut prosedur operasi standard yang bermula dari diri kita dan terus tabah untuk menghadapi krisis ini bersama dengan ahli keluarga dan anggota masyarakat lain. Pastinya, cabaran yang datang ini dapat kita uruskan secara sistematik, cekal dan berkesan. "Bersatu kita teguh, bercerai kita roboh" adalah pepatah masyarakat kita yang diadun dalam kebijaksanaan setempat (*local wisdom*) untuk menggambarkan kepada semua betapa cekalnya kita menghadapi segala cubaan, dugaan, pemikiran, andaian dan kecelaruan yang ada apabila kita berdepan dengan sesuatu cubaan atau dugaan termasuklah virus kesihatan dunia iaitu COVID-19 yang melanda dunia dan semua kita.

Moga kita terus cekal dan dapat memakmurkan muka bumi ini secara yang terbaik. Ilmu dan iman yang ada di dada adalah teras dan prinsip ikutan yang utama. Sekian, terima kasih.

Wasalam.

DATO' DR ABD. HALIM BIN MOHD HUSSIN
Presiden, PERKEMA International

CHAPTER 1

LEADERSHIP COMPETENCIES FOR CRISIS MANAGEMENT: INSIGHTS FROM RETAIL LEADERS DURING PANDEMIC COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

The retail sector is one of the most impacted during the COVID-19 pandemic, however, there is less understanding on the role of retail leaders in business sustainability during lockdown. This chapter presents the findings of nine in-depth interviews of small to mid-sized retail leaders in Sarawak, Malaysia on their business strategies and competencies that helped them overcome their challenges in their respective organizations. Findings from the study show the importance of crisis preparedness and crisis management for retailers. Competencies such as crisis planning and readiness, sense-making, strategic planning, problem solving and decision making, crisis communication, self-management, resiliency and learning ability are suggested as crucial to small retailers. From an HRD perspective, educators, policy makers and related trade associations need to work together with retailers to address retailer development needs.

INTRODUCTION

This study captures the experiences of leaders such as managers and supervisors in the retail industry in Sarawak, Malaysia while handling the COVID-19 crisis in their organizations. The spread and disruption brought by COVID-19 was world-wide. The pandemic shifted the way organizations function due to quarantine and restricted movement, where most resorted

to remote working, reduced physical presence at workplaces, high adoption of technology for communication and establishment of new organizational norms (Gailor, 2020; Meister, 2020). For some organizations that are more susceptible to external and environment changes, it meant threats to survival. Moreover, amid this period of uncertainty, employees were more susceptible to stress, fear, and anxiety (Brooks et al., 2020).

Similarly, COVID-19 affected the business of the retail industry in Malaysia albeit in contrasting ways depending on the retail segment. In Malaysia, the retail sector is segmented by Products (Food and Beverages, Personal and Household Care, Apparel, Footwear, and Accessories, Furniture, Toys, and Hobby, Electronic and Household Appliances, and Other Products) and Distribution Channel (Supermarkets/Hypermarkets, Convenience Stores, and Department Stores, Specialty Stores, Online, and Other Distribution Channels) (Mordor Intelligence, n.d.). Although retail business involved in essentials such as food and daily necessities remained in good business, retailers of non-essentials such as apparel, luxury goods and home appliances reported significant drops in revenue (ABeam Consulting, n.d.). Mordor Intelligence (n.d.) reported the retail industry experienced a contract of around 16% in 2020.

This crisis led to a multitude of challenges for leaders in the retail industry. Sayyadi (2019) defined leadership as an influenced interaction with groups of followers to implement changes and achieve the determined goals in the management function. The role of leaders is a major concern during a crisis because their ability to handle the crisis and manage internal challenges will determine business sustainability. Although the retail sector is one of the most impacted during the Malaysia Movement Control Order (MCO) (Jaafar, 2021), there is less understanding of how more successful retail businesses are able to sustain during the pandemic. Recent studies have shown retail business using various strategies to mitigate the effects of the crisis: contingent leadership approach (Childs, et al., 2022), flexible human resource practices, cost reduction, customer relationship focus, and using government support schemes (Alves, et al., 2020). Thus, it is vital to explore the experiences and strategies of retail leaders during COVID-19 within the context of local restrictions and perspectives. The information gathered may help the sector and related stakeholders strategize further on crisis readiness.

Furthermore, Wooten and James (2008) underscored the lack of research that identifies knowledge, skills, or abilities necessary to lead an organization through phases of crisis. In their work, the authors proposed a set of leadership competencies related to the different stages of crisis development. Dirani et al. (2020) conducted a study on leadership competencies and the essential role of human resource development in times of crisis in response to the COVID19 pandemic. However, their research focused on global leader examples, which although may be similar in some areas but may not be applicable to a more specific sector such as smaller retail business. Meanwhile, Wissitigars and Siengthai (2019) identified competencies such as emergency preparedness; crisis communication, emotional intelligence, leadership skills and problem solving as important competencies for facility managers in Thailand. However, the study was conducted in a different industry and prior to the pandemic. Against this background, understanding leadership competencies associated with crisis management in retail industry is important. In addition to extending the literature on crisis management readiness, exploring retail leader competencies may also add to the competencies-based area of HRD.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to identify business strategies adopted by retail leaders during the MCO and to identify related competencies that helped them overcome their challenges. This study is guided by the crisis development and sense-making model advocated by Alves et al. (2020) and leadership competencies during crisis as suggested by Wooten and James (2008). The chapter begins with a literature review of crisis management and leadership competencies followed by the methodology used. This is followed by the results, discussion, and implications of the study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Crisis Management

A crisis can be defined as “a sudden and expected event that threatens to disrupt an organization’s operations and poses both a financial and a reputational threat” (Coombs, 2007, p.163). James et al. (2011) proposed that a crisis is different from other types of organizational challenges because of its ambiguity, urgency, and high stakes nature. Parsons (1996) referred to a crisis by using time constrain: immediate, emerging and sustained. Immediate crises are problems that appear with no warning;

hence no early preparations were able to be made whereas emerging crises are problems that slowly appear, but they are still unpredictable. Meanwhile sustained crises are problems that last for a long time until many years due to ongoing speculation, gossips, and rumors. The unanticipated, uncertainty, and sustained nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, including its global impact on global economies, community health and social norms point to the scale of the crisis.

Crisis management has to do with strategies designed to help organizations overcome an emergency situation. Generally, scholars identify three main stages in crisis management: pre-crisis, crisis management, and post-crisis (Coombs & Laufer, 2018; Bundy et al., 2017). Pre-crisis refers to the phase when organizations plan their actions for times of crisis. Crisis management is the phase of organization's response to mitigate the effects of crisis. Post-crisis phase is when an organization reflects, adjusts, and improves their plans for the future.

Crisis development and sense-making model

Alves et al. (2020) proposed an integrated crisis development model that considers the roles of internal and external stakeholders throughout the crisis management phases (Bundy et al., 2017) with a sense-making approach that included sense-making, decision making, meaning making, terminating, and learning (Boin et al., 2017). In this integrated model, sense-making challenge occurs in the pre-crisis phase; decision making, meaning making and terminating challenges occur during crisis management phase; and learning challenges occur in the post-crisis phase. The following describes the five sense-making challenges.

Sense-making. "Sense making involves turning circumstances into a situation that is comprehended explicitly in words and that serves as a springboard into action" (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005, p. 409). The process involves trying to understand and interpret ambiguous environment into actionable plans for those involved. Hence, this suggest that leaders must have knowledge on the phenomenon: its origin, development, and future impacts. If leaders fail to comprehend the situation, it may have detrimental effect on the business.

Decision making. The decision-making process requires several stages from identification of the problem to identification of alternatives and selecting the best alternative within existing limitations. In a crisis, the

situation may be constrained further by time and resources. Furthermore, decision making in crisis must be made in an inclusive manner through a collective process (Alves et al, 2020), otherwise decisions made may not be collectively understood and accepted which further leads to implementation difficulty (Boin et al., 2017). However, for small businesses the individual entrepreneur still has a major influence in decision planning (Herbane, 2019), which may likely happen to smaller retail businesses as well. Hence, the decision-making process depends on the ability and ingenuity of the decision maker (Al-Dabbagh, 2020).

Meaning making. This process refers to actions taken to ensure that not only contingency plans are implemented but involves ensuring that the decisions are understood and accepted by others. Boin et al. (2017) offered that at this stage, leaders give meaning to the crisis by providing an account of what is happening, why it is happening and what will be done to address the crisis. A challenge for leaders in trying to make meaning may be due to technological barriers, social barriers due to individual differences and organizational barriers that exist between and among different organizations involved in the crisis (Fischer et al., 2016).

Termination. The termination phase relates to a time of recovery for organizations. Wooten and James (2008) described this as "returning to business as usual" (p.369) or to a state of pre-crisis. This stage involves communicating with employees on the return to "normal" state of the organization to reduce internal or external stakeholder anxiety (Alves et al., 2020).

Learning. One of the important leader roles at the termination of a crisis is to prevent future crisis or to be fully prepared for a crisis. Rather than seeing the crisis as a threat, scholars suggest viewing crisis as an opportunity where leaders and organizational members learn from personal experience and the experience of others to become more innovative in managing the organization (Wooten & James, 2008). Thus, learning and reflecting from crisis experience is an important process and a demanding task for a leader (Deverell, 2013).

Leadership Competencies

Leadership competencies are leadership skills and behaviors that contribute to superior performance (SHRM, 2008). Hollenbeck et al. (2006) described leadership competencies as a particular combination of expertise,

skills, and abilities (KSA) that embody successful leadership within an organization. According to the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) (2008), there are three major leadership competency groups: competencies for leading the organization (e.g., managing change, decision-making, setting vision and strategy); competencies for leading others (e.g., interpersonal skills, valuing diversity, building and maintaining relationships); and competencies for leading self (e.g., managing self, developing adaptability, capacity to learn).

In their study, Wooten and James (2008) explored key leadership competencies based on the five phases of crisis life cycle: signal detection, prevention and preparation, containment and damages, business recovery and learning and reflection. The authors suggested that in signal detection phase, sense-making ability is crucial, whereas in the prevention and preparation phase, competencies needed relate to minimizing weaknesses based on warnings. For containment and damage control phase, operational competencies are required and for business recovery and learning phases, crisis leadership competencies should focus on building organizational resilience and learning.

METHODOLOGY

The goal of this research was to identify leadership competencies associated with managing retail business during the COVID-19 pandemic. Since it was important to understand specific experiences of retail leaders and leadership competencies associated with managing businesses during the pandemic, a qualitative research design approach using semi-structured interviews was chosen as the approach of inquiry. Qualitative research is “the study of the *nature* of phenomena and is especially appropriate for answering questions of *why* something is (not) observed, assessing complex multi-component interventions, and focusing on intervention improvement” (Busetto, et al., 2020, p.1). In qualitative research, the researcher is interested to understand how people make sense of their world and their experiences (Merriam, 2009). Hence a qualitative approach provides the opportunity to capture participants’ account of their experiences, in this case retailers experience in business during the pandemic, and to make general observations (Kvale, 2006).

This study adopted purposive sampling in identifying study participants who could provide most relevant information between the participants and their context (Maxwell, 2013). The study participants consisted of nine retail leaders and managers located in Kuching and Sibul, Malaysia. The retail companies were recruited based on the researchers’ contacts and their proximity to the authors’ hometowns. Sample selection criteria included working in retail line, with at least two years’ experience in a supervisory or leadership position. The participants in this study were varied in terms of their work experience, number of employees responsible for and types of retail (Table 1).

Data collection was conducted during the MCO. Since face-to-face meeting was restricted, interview sessions were conducted and recorded via Webex, Zoom or phone calls with the participants’ consent. An interview guide was used to ensure consistency to a certain extent. Furthermore, prior to the actual data collection, a pilot interview with two informants was conducted. A pilot interview was important to address the study’s validity (Yin, 2014). Amendments were made based on the recommendations during the pilot interview. For the actual data collection, interviews were conducted in English and local dialects, with each session lasting between 30-60 minutes. The audio data were transcribed verbatim at the end of each interview.

The primary method for analyzing data was content analysis. According to Krippendorff (2004), content analysis is “a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use” (p.18). The transcripts were analysed and coded manually iteratively. During this process, transcripts were coded independently and compared with other transcripts to find common meanings and themes.

Table 1: Demographics of study informants

Informant	Gender	Age	Position	Segment	Years of work experience	Number of staff responsible for
I1	Male	20s	Supervisor	Other Products	4	4
I2	Male	40s	Director	Other Products	25	20
I3	Male	20s	Manager	Petrochemicals	3	25

14	Female	20s	Assistant Manager	Food & Beverage	3	15
15	Male	30s	Supervisor	Specialty Products	12	5
16	Male	30s	Manager	Other Distribution Channel	5	30
17	Female	20s	Assistant Manager	Food & Beverage	2	5
18	Female	40s	Sales Manager	Wholesale	23	12
19	Male	40s	Manager	Other Distribution Channel	10	8

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

The findings of the study are presented based on the stages of crisis and sense-making by Alves et al. (2020). For each stage, the strategies adopted by the retailers and competencies are presented and discussed, with examples of informant quotes. All the retailers have experienced the pre-crisis and during crisis stages. Since the COVID-19 pandemic is still ongoing, the termination stage and post-crisis stage are not obvious. For this study, these two stages are discussed as part of the crisis management stage. A summary of the crisis stages, strategies and competencies are shown in Table 2.

Pre-crisis

Sense making. The data showed that majority of the retailers did not anticipate the severity of the situation and did not have structured measures to address lockdowns and long-term business disruption. The unprecedented nature of the pandemic caused retailers not to be able to anticipate the situation accurately. Only three retailers seemed to have a moderate plan of action for a temporary crisis management.

Honestly quiet difficult time for us ...we did not expect this to be like this our company has recovery plans but ... we never have like WFH.... we just don't do that (I8)

During this pre-crisis stage, retailers tried to make sense of what was happening. All of the retailers admitted to being concerned about getting infected. Anxiety and stress among employees were also higher. Three of them highlighted the importance of self-management skills

like staying calm and in control of emotions amidst the initial announcement of MCO.

The first thing I think we have to stay calm down like in every situation lah (I2)

Similar to other industries, the retail industry was required to adhere to stringent rules and standard operating procedures. Although there were variations for rules and procedures based on the type of retail segment, most retailers operated at reduced operation times, reduced number of employees working at the same time, reduced number of allowable customers on premise at any one time, mask wearing, and physical distancing (Majlis Keselamatan Negara, 2021; Bernama, 2021). The retail companies in this study were small to medium size. As leaders, they were responsible to make sense of the situation and act accordingly. However, few were able to make accurate assessment of the situation. Nevertheless, some of the retailers were able to regulate their own behaviors which may have helped with managing the crisis.

Table 2: Crisis challenges, strategies, and leader competencies

Crisis challenges	Strategies adopted (number of informants)	Competencies
Pre-crisis Sense-making	Moderate preparation (3)	Sense-making (2) Self-management (3)
During crisis Making decisions	Exploring new ways to sustain business (9) Modify work policies (7)	Problem-solving skills (5) Resourceful (3)
Making meaning	Communicating with employees (5)	Communication skills (5) Ability to motivate (3)
Termination or back to normal	Continuous implementation of safety procedures and employee well-being (7)	Resilience (2)
Learning	Technology adoption in business (5)	Capacity to learn (5)

During crisis

Making decisions. Regardless of the type of business, the retail leaders admitted that their businesses were affected by the pandemic

and MCO. The data suggested that retailers strategized new ways of remaining in business through reducing operational cost, adopting technology (via social media and applications) and modifying work policies (rescheduling work and remote working). One of the retailers had to close one of the branches as well to cut cost.

We had shorter opening hours we don't need many staff around, so help us cut cost also (15)

...we now depending on order from Food Panda and Grab Food also because no one is allowed to eat inside the premise, right? So, through

these two applications, people still can order food from us. It means customers buy online. At least from this, we still can get our sales lah (14)

Because of we are working with the restriction of 30 to 40 percent of workforce allowed, ... work by take turn to come to the workplace. Let's say this week I come to work, then next week I will just stay at home. Other employees also the same. We take turn to come to work. So, so, by that we can... make the space at the workplace er to keep social distancing and... work with less risk of virus (11)

The strategies adopted were mostly short-term in nature, meant to address the current pandemic situation and restriction imposed by the government. As such, leaders had to problem solve and make appropriate decisions for the sustainability of the business within limited time, information and in stressful condition. Most retailers underscored the importance of problem-solving skills. Three suggested being resourceful as vital to ensure up-to-date knowledge and innovative ways to overcome pandemic challenges.

Problem solving. We as a leaders must be competent in making decision under pressure situation. The problems face might be varied (14)

We try to get daily updates ...of SOPs and anything else related to COVID-19...ya because SOP can change, so we need to know then we can follow it (19)

Meaning making. In a crisis, changes and uncertainty do not just

affect the business but has profound effect on the employees. During the pandemic, employees were introduced to new ways of working and socializing (i.e., physical distancing, mask wearing, MySejahtera application). It is important that employees understand the company's new norms and policies. Findings showed that majority of the leaders communicated with their employees on the implementation of these new norms and policies either via face-to-face or through social media such as Google Meet, Zoom, WhatsApp and Telegram. This points to the importance of leader-employee communication channels. These changes to work and social life may affect the motivation and mental/physical health of employees. Therefore, keeping an open line of communication through different channels may be important for the employees. The findings also demonstrate the importance of being able to motivate employees during a crisis. Since the size of retailers in this study were small, communicating and relating to employees were easier.

We update with each other through Google Meet and WhatsApp ...we tell our salespeople the government updates.... ya, we still meet weekly la but now using online (18)

Any staff or worker that faced personal difficulties are always welcomed to have talks and meetings to resolve any issues that are impacted their lives.... Sense of belonging is proven to boost the morale. All staff and workers is treated with care and respect (12)

Termination or back to normal. Although the crisis development model shows the end stage to a crisis, however, the COVID-19 pandemic was still ongoing in 2021. Hence a distinct post-crisis stage is not available. However, as more people are being vaccinated in the country and infection rates are steadily reducing, the government is slowly easing of restrictions prompting a back to "normal" mode. The data suggested that retail leaders continuously implemented safety procedures and employee well-being. Two retailers described being resilient and recovering from setbacks as important for them during the pandemic.

Ya...we all got booster but we still careful... in our office we wear mask and sanitize (19)

We ensure ourselves to adhere with the given SOP to maintain

the health and safety of available staff. Weekly safety briefings and job plans carried out to ensure and remind all staff during this MCO period (16)

We had quite a few positive cases (among employees) ...and we had to temporarily close few times, sanitize the office. For sure affected our business ...what to do? But so far, we are still surviving... (18)

In crisis leadership, the ability of the leader to lead an organization, manage challenges and strategize new ways to cope can be described as resiliency. According to Vargo and Seville (2011), resilience is not only about the organization's ability to survive during the crisis but also to thrive. It is about the leader's ability to absorb the shocks and recover following a difficult situation (Sutcliffe & Vogus, 2003).

Learning. The findings showed that the pandemic brought opportunities for learning for retail leaders and their companies. A majority of the retailers described turning to technology for business sustainability. This included social media as a platform for sales and promotion. Furthermore, some retailers (e.g., food and beverage; specialty store) added electronic payments for customers to encourage contactless payment. During this time, retailers and their employees had to learn to use technology for different facets of their business. This also pointed to the importance of being adaptable to changes and open to new learning.

Intervention probably would be our communication channels. Previously we don't have. We never, we don't have, let's say, we don't have, we never have online. It's not something that we would do. Meeting is always in a physical setting... would say telecommunication ways is a good strategy to keep update and engage (11).

We updated our system.... now we use eWallet for customers to pay. Actually, we wanted to but the pandemic sort of make it happen faster for us (15).

IMPLICATIONS

The retail industry especially non-essential segment was one of the hardest hits during the COVID-19 pandemic. The retailers in the study are mostly small to medium sized. Small retailers may be at a disadvantage due to their limited resources and networking capabilities (Jonathan, 2018). Findings from the study show that if the retailers were to sustain their business, the leaders need to be strategic in their approach to crisis management. Furthermore, Wang, Hutchins, and Garavan (2009) suggested the development of organization-specific capabilities and learning to facilitate pre, during and post crisis management. This entails a purposeful development of crisis management understanding and readiness for retail leaders. The following are suggestions for competency development areas for retailers:

Crisis readiness. The study showed limited readiness in anticipating crisis among retail leaders. When government regulations were imposed almost immediately, it created confusion and uncertainty on retail operations. The retail leaders did the best they could to overcome the situation with limited knowledge and resources. Only three retailers seemed to have a plan for any emergency. Hence, retail leaders are recommended to develop competencies regarding crisis planning and readiness, sense-making, and strategic planning.

Problem solving. Retail leaders in this study agreed that problem solving, and resourcefulness skills are important when they need to make decisions on the next course of action. Since the retailers are mostly from small-medium sized enterprises, most take upon themselves to find solutions for the business. It is suggested that leaders should develop competencies in problem solving, analysis and resourcefulness.

Crisis communication. The retail leaders showed that communication was critical during a crisis. The literature also shows the importance of continuously communicating with internal and external stakeholders throughout the process of managing a crisis (Wooten & James, 2008; Alves, et al., 2020). Retail leaders need to be able to communicate with different audiences using different modes.

In addition, they need to be able to communicate with empathy and sensitivity to employees, and other stakeholders. Currently training and development of small business leaders focus on closing the skills gaps (Lans et al., 2016) while neglecting soft skills such as communication skills (Jonathan, 2018) especially in times of crisis.

Self-management and resiliency. When one is in a crisis, it affects the ability to think clearly. It is suggested that those who are able to understand and manage their emotions will respond better to a crisis (Kumar, et al., 2014). Self-management skills allow a leader to be in charge of their emotion, thought and behaviour. Mastering self-management skills may allow for improved short-term and long-term planning. Furthermore, leaders should develop resiliency competency to improve functioning and perseverance amidst adversity.

Learning ability. The ability to learn is an important competency when facing a crisis. According to Wooten and James (2008), the best leaders find learning opportunities even during a crisis. Following the crisis, retail leaders agreed that technology changed how they communicate internally and with their customers and more technological changes may be incorporated after the crisis ends. Therefore, a focus to develop continuous learning and a learning orientation may be crucial for retail leaders.

CONCLUSION

This study identified business strategies and related competencies of retail leaders while managing the COVID-19 crisis in their respective organizations. The study findings were presented based on the stages of crisis and sense-making by Alves et al. (2020). All the retailers experienced pre-crisis and during crisis stages, however, since the pandemic is still ongoing, post-crisis business strategies and competencies are less obvious. Findings from the study show the importance of crisis preparedness and crisis management for retailers. Competencies such as crisis planning and readiness, sense-making, strategic planning, problem solving and decision making, crisis communication, self-management, resiliency and learning ability are suggested as crucial areas for development of small retailers. From an HRD perspective, educators, policy makers and related trade associations need to work together with retailers to address retailer

development needs. In addition, this study focuses on retailers in Sarawak, Malaysia. Findings may not be generalized to other regions.

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