

LEADERSHIP BEHAVIOURS IN TIMES OF PANDEMIC: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY IN THE LOCAL PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION OF ROMANIA

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ABSTRACT

The present research aims to investigate the gender differences and similarities in the leadership styles practiced by civil servants in management positions during the Covid-19 pandemic, in the local public administration of Romania. The study focused on transformational and transactional leadership styles. The research methodology consisted of a sociological survey, conducted in one of Bucharest's (Romania's capital) districts, among civil servants in execution positions who assessed their direct leaders' behaviors. The research revealed that during the Covid-19 pandemic, the studied leaders exhibited predominantly behaviors specific to transformational and also transactional leadership. In women's case, none of the two leadership styles was predominant. Male leaders tend to exhibit transformational behaviors, more than transactional ones. Civil servants within the sample considered that during the pandemic, their direct hierarchic superiors, exhibited predominantly transformational and transactional behaviors, the most appropriate leadership behaviors in times of crises and rarely, laissez-faire behaviors.

KEYWORDS: *Leadership, Covid -19 pandemic, local public administration of Romania*

1. INTRODUCTION

Over time, European countries made significant progress regarding men and women's access to labor market and leadership positions, by implementing policies to increase gender equality. Even if they have taken measures aiming to limit gender discrimination in all forms and ensure equal access for men and women in all fields of work, the Covid-19 pandemic has shown that gender inequalities continue to exist. Women are recognized today as having the same rights as men in terms of access to the labor market and income levels, but attention should be focused on different labor fields to see if women are guaranteed equal access to leadership positions and if they are considered to be as good leaders as men.

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought many challenges to gender equality, raising gender disparities more than ever. This situation had negative impact on economies and conducted to the decision of integrating the principle of gender equality in all policies, strategies, and programs in the European Union's countries (European Commission, 2022). It has also opened a new path for leadership and gender studies, as previous research revealed that the qualities of male leaders are better appreciated and more appropriate for crisis management, as they present the so-called agentic traits (Profiroiu & Nastacă, 2020). Also, female leaders' behaviors should continue to be studied due to the contradictory results revealed by previous research (see Bartol & Martin, 1986; Nieva & Gutek, 1981; van Engen et al. 2001, Powell, 1990, Mendez & Busenbark, 2013, Blake-Beard, Shapiro & Ingols, 2020, Garikipati & Kambhampati, 2021, Abu Nasra & Arar, 2020), to try to establish if men and women actually differ when it comes to exhibiting leadership behaviors or if women's approach is different, using more effective styles, which should give them an advantage when occupying leadership

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positions. In this respect, the present research aims to investigate the leadership styles practiced in the local public administration of Romania during the Covid-19 pandemic, in order to observe if men and women leaders behaved in the same manner or differently, exhibiting leadership behaviors suited for managing crises, such as the transformational leadership.

2. A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE CONCEPT OF LEADERSHIP

Leadership is one of the most studied concepts in the literature, therefore, a commonly accepted definition was not established. The most general definition refers to leadership as a process that revolves around ideas and directions, aiming to motivate people, give meaning to work, and coordinate activities from different perspectives (Yukl, 2010; Van der Voet, Ben, & Groeneveld, 2016, Burns, 1978). A leader should be capable of making employees give their best, motivating them to do various activities without the use of formal means of control (Bennis, 1989). Therefore, it can be understood that leadership is a process in which a person can lucidly and intentionally influence those around him/her, helping them to perform certain tasks necessary to achieve a common goal (Bass & Bass, 2008, Hințea, 2015).

The literature reveals numerous classifications of leadership theories and many leadership styles, from traits theories, behavioral theories, those based on the exchange process between leaders and their subordinates, contingency theories and modern theories that defined the transformational and transactional leadership styles (Van Seters & Field, 1990, King, 1990, Yukl, 1989, Bass, 1990, Burns, 1978). Of the main leadership theories, the present research will focus on transformational and transactional styles, because previous findings revealed the presence of gender differences in using these styles and also because they are considered the most appropriate leadership behaviors in crises (Diaz-Saenz, 2011, Singh & Krishnan, 2008, Bass & Bass, 2008, Bass & Riggio, 2006, Burns, 1978). Transformational leadership reflects the power of transforming a vision into reality (Filip, 2015) being a process that changes and transforms people. Transformational leaders focus on values, ethics, standards, long-term goals and innovation, being able to exert an exceptional form of influence over their subordinates, helping them achieve more than is usually expected (Filip, 2015). This type of leader succeeds in developing intrinsic motivation, considering employees the most important resource in the organization, and inspiring them to put the collective interest before the personal one (Bass, 1999). Furthermore, transformational leaders focus on developing professional and emotional connections with subordinates, using charisma to inspire and make them understand the importance of embracing the vision, mission, and values of the organization and also gaining their trust. More than that, this leadership style is geared toward engaging employees in the decision-making process by stimulating their creativity and encouraging them to find innovative solutions to solve problems (Bass, 1999). They promote lifelong learning, the development of employee's skills and competencies, and the search for new solutions to prevent or solve organizational problems. These leaders inspire subordinates, show trust and respect for the organizational culture, are proud to be associated with the organization, and use charisma to create these emotions and feelings within their subordinates (Profiroiu & Nastacă, 2021, Țiclău & Hințea, 2016, Țiclău, 2012). Transactional leadership supposes that the relationship between leaders and subordinates is based on a transaction. This relationship involves costs and benefits for both parties. For leaders, these exchanges allow them to achieve their performance goals, solve their tasks, develop extrinsic motivation, find rewarding methods, avoid risks, and focus on improving organizational efficiency. As for subordinates, this style allows them to fulfill their own interests, especially the material ones, and focus on achieving organizational objectives. They are motivated by the leader's promises and rewards. The mistakes are corrected by negative feedback or disciplinary sanctions. Leaders react when their followers achieve what they have traded. As result of this exchange, subordinates will receive what they need (usually financial benefits) assuming that the leader knows the needs of his followers and the factors that motivate them the most. For this leadership style to have positive effects, such as increasing efficiency or organizational performance, the group of followers must be motivated by this system of rewards

and sanctions and recognize leader's position of authority (Profiroiu & Nastacă, 2021, Țiclău & Hințea, 2016, Țiclău, 2012, Bass & Bass, 2008).

Transactional leaders either plan tasks or consult with their followers about what needs to be done, promising rewards and allocating the necessary resources, or predicting the performance of their subordinates and correcting their mistakes. Furthermore, they can act passively, being only aware of the mistakes made by subordinates and taking actions to correct them by providing negative feedback or sanctions (Țiclău & Hințea, 2016, Țiclău, 2012, Bass & Bass, 2008). As can be observed, transactional leadership focuses particularly on leader's actions to achieve objectives and motivate through reward-punishment relations. Basically, the transactional leader seeks to motivate employees through sanctions and rewards systems and help them achieve goals, so if members of the group receive the desired rewards, they will make every effort to work as efficiently and effectively as possible for the benefit of the organization. To be placed in this category, leaders must be able to understand employees' needs and desires and also manage the necessary resources to fulfill those needs (Filip, 2015, Țiclău & Hințea, 2016, Țiclău, 2012, Bass & Bass, 2008). The laissez-faire leadership style is a non-involvement type of behavior with negative long-term results on the organization's performance. Leaders who exhibit this type of behavior usually do not want to interfere with the decision-making process. Employees take decisions about their work and are free to carry out their activities in their own way, being responsible for their decisions. Sometimes leaders provide them with information but avoid giving feedback (Chaundhry & Javed, 2021). In conclusion, transactional leaders try to implement organizational changes by developing an exchange-based relationship and rewarding those who work. In contrast, transformational leaders seek for potential in each employee, want to meet the superior needs of their subordinates, and fully engage in the management process, leaving behind their personal interests. The two leadership behaviors are different and complement each other. In reality, the two leadership styles are not easy to distinguish because a leader can have characteristics of both styles and even of laissez-faire. Even if a leader does not have characteristics of a single leadership style, this does not have a negative impact on organizational performance as long as noninvolvement behaviors are missing or exhibited to a small extent (Profiroiu & Nastacă, 2020).

3. A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LEADERSHIP AND GENDER

Leadership and gender are topics from a wide range of scientific research developed starting in the early 1970s. Many studies on leadership and gender considered that masculinity predominates more than femininity in identifying variables of leaders' behaviors and in explaining organizational behavior. A woman in a leadership position was not seen as a manifestation of social evolution, but rather as an exception, because the dominant model of a leader, is the masculine one (Paoloni & Demartini, 2016). Leadership and gender are two related concepts because it is assumed that gender influences leadership behaviors.

Depending on gender, leaders behave differently because they have certain social roles to fulfill that are coupled with distinct expectations that require different skills and abilities. An example would be that women take care of their children and family more often than men and men are more likely to work outside home. Both genders confirm the concept of gender stereotypes because the different roles they have to fulfill give them different social demands (Vogel et al., 2003). Male leaders tend to have broader views of stereotypes about successful managerial roles than women. However, women leaders' stereotypes are not so different from those of men. Women who are placed in management positions believe more in their own qualities and abilities than in men's. Also, stereotypes vary according to the types of employees, or organizations (Eriksson et al., 2017). Stereotypes divide the perception about leaders in masculine and feminine traits. Feminine characteristics refer to: using intuition in decision-making, being attentive, and maintaining a balance between personal and professional life. On the contrary, men build knowledge based on past

experiences, are more willing to take risks, are calmer, and assign clear responsibilities and goals. Women are better at managing people and their needs by forming a stable bond with their teams and have better listening skills. Regarding results, women exhibit a great interest in achieving goals and have high expectations both from their teammates and themselves. Men's results focus on strategic planning and the overall vision of the institution (Helgesen, 1995, Radu, et al., 2017). Gender differences reflected in leadership styles have also been highlighted by research on transformational and transactional styles. The social role theory shows that there would be differences between women and men regarding the use of these leadership styles. These differences could be due to the influence of gender roles on leaders' behaviors, the dynamics of role congruence, or internalized gender norms at the organizational level. The authors believe that women will prefer the transformational style because it would help them overcome the barriers caused by the incongruity between their gender and their leadership role (Eagly, et al. 2003). This style provides the opportunity for female leaders not to give the impression of masculine behaviors (Yoder, 2001). In addition, the transformational leadership style involves the exercise of specific feminine behaviors, but also of neutral behaviors, not being associated with any gender. These assumptions are based on the fact that transformational leaders exhibit "common" traits, such as individualized consideration, and thus, this style seems to be more closely related to women (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001). Moreover, the characteristics of transformational leaders are very similar to women's behaviors, oriented towards the development of interpersonal relationships. More than that, previous studies revealed that men tend to behave in a more transactional manner (Rosener, 1990, Bass & Avolio, 1994). They are more task-oriented, and this type of behavior is specific to transactional leaders (Merchant, 2012). Also, men leaders will engage more in passive leadership behaviors such as: management by exception (active and passive) and laissez-faire style (Eagly et al., 2003).

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Considering that previous studies revealed that leaders behave differently according to their gender, the study aims to identify if there are any gender differences in the leadership practiced by civil servants in management positions from the local public administration, during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The main objective of the study is to investigate the gender differences and similarities in the leadership styles practiced by civil servants in management positions during the Covid-19 pandemic and to establish if any of the studied leadership styles prevailed more in their behaviors.

The study started with the following assumptions:

- *H1. Female leaders exhibited transformational behaviors more than men.*
- *H2. Male leaders are considered to behave in a transactional manner more than women.*
- *H3. Both types of leaders exhibited mostly, during the Covid-19 pandemic, the transformational style, which is considered most suited to managing crises.*

Research design and data collection

The present research is an exploratory study conducted in District Hall 6 (one of the sixth districts of Bucharest, Romania's capital) to investigate civil servants' perception regarding the practiced leadership, aiming to discover if there were differences between the manner women and men led in times of pandemics. Furthermore, the study proposes to reveal whether leaders in this organization exhibited predominantly transformational behaviors, as this leadership style, was considered to be better suited in crises.

The research methodology consisted of a sociological survey based on the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) 5X questionnaire, developed by researchers Bernard Bass and Bruce Avolio (1996) to measure three leadership styles- transactional, transformational, and laissez-faire. The questionnaire comprises 36 statements presenting specific leadership behaviors for each of the leadership types mentioned above, as it follows: 20 items assessed transformational behaviors, 8

measured transactional behaviors, and 8 the laissez-faire ones. The items were evaluated on the Likert scale at five points, where each item of the scale meant: 1 = not at all; 2= once in a while; 3= sometimes; 4= fairly often; 5 = frequent if not always.

The study sample was chosen using the exhaustive sampling method, with the questionnaire being sent to all the civil servants in the institution, through the Human Resources department. Of the 201 civil servants working in District Hall 6- 32 in management positions and 169 in execution positions, 80 civil servants agreed to participate in the study. The questionnaire was sent only to the execution civil servants asking them to evaluate their first hierarchical superiors (namely, the chief of bureau) leadership behaviors exhibited in the two years of the pandemic. The distribution of the questionnaire was made in the May-June 2022 period. Of the total number of respondents, 69% were women and 31% were men. All participants in the study occupied execution positions. 10% had seniority in the institution of fewer than 5 years, 35% between 5 and 10 years, 20% between 10 and 20 years and 35% had a tenure of more than 20 years. 60% of the respondents had as direct hierarchical superior a woman and 40% a man.

5. DATA ANALYSIS AND MAIN FINDINGS

The next section presents the average distribution of responses on each leadership behavior. The results are presented comparatively, based on the leaders' gender, in order to reveal the presence of differences between men and women.

Table 1. Comparison between leaders' transformational behaviors, based on their gender

<i>Transformational leadership</i>	<i>Average of responses</i>	
<i>Leadership behaviors/ Leaders' gender</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>M</i>
<i>1. He/She instills pride in the persons that are associated with him/her.</i>	2,75	3,75
<i>2. He/She goes beyond own interest for the benefit of the group.</i>	3,75	3,75
<i>3. He/She acts in ways that build respect.</i>	3,68	3,62
<i>4. He/She shows a sense of confidence and power.</i>	3,56	3,62
<i>5. He/She talks about values and beliefs.</i>	3,25	2,75
<i>6. He/She believes it is important to have a strong sense of purpose.</i>	3,84	3,75
<i>7. He/She takes into account the ethical consequences of him/her decisions.</i>	4	3,75
<i>8. He/She stresses the importance of believing in the organizational culture.</i>	4,06	4
<i>9. He/She speaks with optimism about the future.</i>	3,5	3,37
<i>10. He/She talks with enthusiasm about the goals that need to be achieved.</i>	4,12	3,75
<i>11. He/She designs a compelling vision of the future.</i>	3,62	3,5
<i>12. He/She is confident that the goals will be achieved.</i>	4,12	3,62
<i>13. He/She reviews critical assumptions.</i>	3,12	3,12
<i>14. He/She analyses from different perspectives when solving problems.</i>	4,18	3,62
<i>15. He/She helps others to analyze problems from different points of view.</i>	3,87	3,37
<i>16. He/She suggests new ways of completing assignments.</i>	3,62	3,25
<i>17. He/She allocates time for teaching and coaching.</i>	2,31	2,75
<i>18. He/She treats subordinates as individuals and not just as members of a group.</i>	2,12	3
<i>19. He/She considers every employee to have different needs, desires and aspirations.</i>	4,43	3,62
<i>20. He/She helps others to develop their strengths.</i>	3,43	3,62
<i>Total average</i>	3,51	3,45

Source: Authors, 2022

Table 1 shows the distribution of the averages computed for each transformational leadership behavior, according to the gender of the hierarchical superiors. As can be observed, in 13 out of 20 cases, female leaders obtained higher scores. Both categories of leaders exhibit transformational behaviors quite often. The total averages obtained by female and male leaders on the transformational component are similar, nevertheless, it cannot be considered that there are significant differences between the two genders regarding the practice of transformational leadership. However, it is observed that, as stated by previous studies, female leaders tend to be more transformational. The results reveal that female leaders in the studied institution are concerned with the needs of their subordinates, show a high degree of trust in their subordinates and in the fact that they will succeed in achieving their goals, are interested in the mission, organizational vision and values, try to solve problems from different perspectives, to a higher extent than male leaders do. In addition, compared to women, male leaders have more confidence in their own powers, show strength, put collective interests above personal ones and devote more time to guiding and teaching subordinates. In conclusion, it can be stated that the studied leaders (chiefs of bureau) exhibit transformational behaviors to a pretty high extent. There is a tendency for female leaders to use transformational behaviors more than male leaders, but overall, there are no major differences between the two genders in terms of exhibiting this leadership style.

Table 2. Comparison between leaders' transactional behaviors, based on their gender

<i>Transactional leadership</i>	<i>Average of responses</i>	
<i>Leaders' gender/ Leadership behaviors</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>M</i>
<i>1. He/She offers assistance to others in exchange for their efforts.</i>	3,18	3,12
<i>2. He/She clearly discusses who is responsible for achieving the performance targets.</i>	3,56	3,12
<i>3. He/She clarifies which is the reward when performance targets are met.</i>	3,62	3,12
<i>4. He/She is happy when others meet his/hers expectations.</i>	4,37	3,75
<i>5. He/She focuses the attention rather on what is wrong.</i>	3,68	2,62
<i>6. He/She focuses the attention on removing errors, complaints, and failures.</i>	3,87	3,37
<i>7. He/She keeps track of all mistakes</i>	3,06	2,87
<i>8. He/She directs his/hers attention to the failures of others to meet standards.</i>	2,62	2,75
<i>Total average</i>	3,49	3,09

Source: Authors, 2022

The table above shows the distribution of the averages obtained by each group (female and male leaders) regarding the behaviors specific to the transactional style. It can be observed that in 7 of the 8 behaviors specific to this style, female leaders achieved higher scores. These results are not consistent with previous studies that supported the fact that male leaders tend to use transactional behaviors to a higher extent than women. The results of the present study may be due to the fact that public administration in Romania is a feminine field of work, where women are represented in a higher proportion than men, inclusively at the managerial level. For this reason, female leaders might have borrowed behaviors that are considered to be masculine. The general averages obtained by both categories of leaders are close. From this point of view, it can be stated that both women and men exhibit transactional behaviors quite often. Consequently, it can be affirmed that both women and men support their subordinates in fulfilling their objectives, present in a very clear manner what they expect from their team and also focus on errors, mistakes, which can lead to demotivation among civil servants.

Table 3. Comparison between leaders' laissez-faire behaviors, based on their gender

<i>Laissez-faire leadership</i>	<i>Average of responses</i>	
<i>Leaders' gender/ Leadership behaviors</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>M</i>
<i>1. He/She does not intervene until the problems get serious.</i>	2,62	3,12
<i>2. He/She is waiting for things to go wrong before taking any decisions.</i>	2	2,12
<i>3. If something is not broken, he/she won't fix it.</i>	2,5	1,75
<i>4. He/She believes that problems must become really serious before taking action.</i>	2,12	2,37
<i>5. He/She avoids involving when important issues arise.</i>	1,93	2,25
<i>6. He/She chooses to be absent when needed.</i>	1,75	2,12
<i>7. He/She avoids decision-making.</i>	1,31	2,12
<i>8. He/She answers late at urgent requests.</i>	2	2,5
<i>Total average</i>	2,15	2,29

Source: Authors, 2022

Table 3 presents the distribution of the averages obtained by the two categories of leaders, regarding the behaviors specific to the non-leadership component, namely, the laissez-faire style. It can be observed that only in one case, female leaders achieved a higher score. These results are consistent with the findings of previous studies, which stated that male leaders tend to exhibit more, behaviors specific to the non-leadership component. Overall, there are no significant differences between the averages achieved by men and women. It can be stated that both categories of leaders exercise these behaviors only once in a while. The results show a positive perception of the studied leaders, because the use of laissez-faire behaviors decreases the satisfaction and motivation of subordinates, having a negative effect on the performance of employees.

6. MAIN CONCLUSIONS

The research revealed that the studied leaders in District Hall 6 exhibited predominantly behaviors specific to transformational and also transactional leadership. In women's case, none of the two leadership styles was predominant, consequently, it can be assumed that they are both transformational and transactional leaders, to the same extent. Male leaders tend to exhibit transformational behaviors, more than transactional ones. The perception about the chiefs of bureau is a positive one. Civil servants within the sample considered that during the pandemic, their direct hierarchic superiors exhibited mostly transformational and transactional behaviors, the most appropriate leadership behaviors in times of crises and rarely, laissez-faire behaviors.

The first hypothesis of the study (Female leaders exhibited transformational behaviors more than men) was validated, as women scored higher than men on this style. Nevertheless, there cannot be assumed significant differences between the two types of leaders, but women's tendency to be more transformational than men was observed. The second hypothesis (Male leaders are considered to behave in a transactional manner more than women) did not validate, as the results showed that men were perceived to be more transformational than transactional. The third hypothesis (Both types of leaders exhibited mostly, during the Covid-19 pandemic, the transformational style, which is the most suited to managing crises) was validated, because the nonleadership behaviors were observed only to a small extent.

In addition, the research revealed that in the studied organization, gender cannot be considered a variable that influences the practiced leadership, as both men and women leaders were considered to behave in a similar manner.

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