Leaders' Resilience: What Leaders Can Learn from the COVID-19 Crisis

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Introduction

At the beginning of 2020, the world was hit by a global pandemic that was triggered by the spread of a new coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2. Despite a short phase of flattening the COVID-19 infection curve, this crisis is still not over, whereby economic prospects continue to be gloomy. This suggests that the crisis will be worse and longer than the financial crisis in 2008 initiated by the Lehman bankruptcy, probably the worst crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930s.

Living and operating in a global world, the risk for a global economic crisis has never been greater, thus pressuring leaders to get their companies ready for any economic situation. Drawn from these circumstances, extraordinary leaders are increasingly characterized by how they deal with adversity, if they are able to find meaning in negative events, and if they can learn from the trying circumstances (Bennis & Thomas, 2002). Since leaders, through a trickle-down-effect, have a major impact on their employees' health, well-being, and productivity (e.g., Avey et al., 2011; Gooty et al., 2009; Walumbwa et al., 2010), their psychological health status emerges as a real competitive factor during the COVID-19 crisis. The ability to effectively deal with critical situations and, ideally, grow in the face of adversity, is not, as often mistakenly assumed, magical; it is resilience (e.g., Masten, 2001). It can be said that leaders' resilience is exactly the stuff true leadership is made of

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S. K. Dhiman, J. F. Marques (eds.), *Leadership After COVID-19*, Future of Business and Finance, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-84867-5_2

(Bennis & Thomas, 2002). Nonetheless, and even if there are a lot of recommendations for how leaders should lead their businesses through the coronavirus crisis (e.g., Reeves et al., 2020) or what good leadership should look like during this pandemic (e.g., Kerrissey & Edmondson, 2020), little is known about how leaders themselves can stay resilient in this exceptional situation.

Our chapter aims to help in closing this research gap. Building on previous resilience research in the fields of psychology and management as well as our own empirical work, i.e., several interview studies concerning leaders' resilience (e.g., Foerster & Duchek, 2017) and an online survey with 403 leaders belonging to different leadership levels and working in multiple industrial sectors, we are able to provide insights into how leaders can overcome major crises healthily and productively. We develop a leaders' resilience model that points to central behavioral resilience factors in the leadership context. These factors refer to the phases before, during, and after the critical event and depend on the leaders' traits and abilities as well as their private and work-related environments. Although the COVID-19 crisis is not over yet, it is time to draw first conclusions and summarize what we can learn from this extreme crisis. Thus, we use the COVID-19 crisis to illustrate the individual parts of the model and draw lessons learned for future leadership practice. Thereby, we not only show what is important while dealing with grand challenges such as the COVID-19 crisis (Howard-Grenville, 2020) but also contribute to what McKiernan and Tsui (2019) labeled as responsible management research (Tourish, 2020), especially since this will probably not be the last global pandemic. With our theoretical model on leaders' resilience, we provide a helpful starting point for future research as well as for leaders' resilience promotion in practice.

Defining Resilience

Referring to its original research discipline, developmental psychology, definitions of individual resilience are numerous and diverse. Notably, two concepts in those definitions are fundamental: *adversity* and *positive adaptation* (e.g., Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000; Wright et al., 2013). Incorporating both of these concepts, resilience can be defined as "positive adaptation in the face of risk or adversity" (Wright et al., 2013: 17). In addition, resilience needs to be conceptualized as a process that varies *contextually* (i.e., depending on the various spheres of life), *situationally* (i.e., from situation to situation), and *temporally* (i.e., across the lifespan) (Foerster & Duchek, 2018; Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013; Gu & Day, 2007; Luthar et al., 2000; Vanderbilt-Adriance & Shaw, 2008; Windle, 2011).

Resilience in the Leadership Context

Although academic interest in resilience—not only in developmental psychology but also in the organizational context (Linnenluecke, 2017; Luthar et al., 2000; Robertson et al., 2015; Williams et al., 2017)—has increased in recent years,

resilience research in the leadership context is still at a preliminary stage (for review, see Foerster & Duchek, 2018). Considering the current state of research on leaders' resilience, Foerster and Duchek (2018) point to the imbalanced research on factors influencing leaders' resilience, in which researchers mainly focus on the identification of resilience-promoting individual factors instead of resilience-promoting and resilience-impeding situational and behavioral factors. Regarding a proper definition, leaders' resilience can, with reference to the main psychological literature, be depicted as the leaders' ability to not only effectively deal with critical situations, challenges, and crisis but also to grow through it (e.g., Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013; Foerster & Duchek, 2017, 2018; Wright et al., 2013).

Although there is no specific model of leaders' resilience available so far, certain theoretical approaches in the work context can help in developing a model of leaders' resilience. In particular, three frameworks are worth being mentioned:

1. King and Rothstein's (2010) model, used by McLarnon and Rothstein (2013), depicts workplace resilience as a collection of protective factors and dynamic processes. Their model distinguishes personal characteristics, forms of social support, and self-regulatory processes that, when combined, help individuals overcome adverse situations and maintain well-being and performance. In particular, self-regulatory processes, as part of the resilience process, can be differentiated into affective mechanisms related to controlling and regulating emotions, behavioral mechanisms related to understanding and controlling behaviors, and cognitive self-regulation mechanisms related to understanding and controlling thoughts and thinking patterns.
2. Cooper et al.'s (2013) framework for understanding employees' resilience to workplace pressure describes resilience as a dynamic process involving interactions between personality and situations. Whereas the model describes personality primarily in terms of the five-factor model of personality, it describes situations as either sources of workplace pressure and support or other situational factors (e.g., home life). The model contains 12 personal characteristics important for resilience in the workplace and assigns them to four categories: confidence (e.g., positive emotions and optimism), purposefulness (e.g., self-control and conscientiousness), adaptability (e.g., intelligence, problem-solving, and improvisational skills), and forms of social support (e.g., self-awareness and sociability).
3. Kossek and Perrigino's (2016) integrated occupational resilience framework shows that resilience is not only influenced by individual but also occupational factors, in which resilience can be both generalized across occupations as well as job-specific with regard to "occupation triggers or pressure points" (p. 732). Based on their review, the authors depict resilience as a multi-level framework, where occupational resilience is described as the "synthesis of an individual's traits, capacities or coping strategies, and processes" that are used to positively adapt to adversity and risks arising from one's organizational and occupational context (p. 764). Thus, occupational resilience is depicted as a dynamic framework where "stressors are mediated by resilience and moderated by occupational and organizational contexts" (p. 765).

Taken together, these models imply that resilience in the workplace rests upon the interaction of various factors that can be both individual and context-specific. In particular, the three presented frameworks illustrate that resilience outcomes result from the interaction of individual factors, situational factors, and resilience processes and thus provide a deeper explanation of the relationship between resilience factors (risk and protective factors) and resilience processes.

Until now, most studies on resilience in the workplace have focused on individual or person-related resources (e.g., Rees et al., 2015; van Doorn & Hülsheger, 2015), whereby the social environment in which the individual interacts, in particular regarding his or her occupational context, has often been neglected (Kossek & Perrigino, 2016). In this sense, scholars have merely underscored the importance of social support for individual resilience (e.g., Kearns & McArdle, 2012; Wang et al., 2014; Zunz, 1998), but did not examine how the situational factors differ depending on the occupational context (Kossek & Perrigino, 2016). Based on the review of management studies and examination of 11 occupations, Kossek and Perrigino (2016) showed that due to stress triggers that can be general or job-specific, resilience can be as well. This means, based on the "occupational task and contextual demands," we need to distinguish what resilience means and, thus, consider that resilience can be both "individually and occupationally determined" (Kossek & Perrigino, 2016: 729). Although leaders are not an occupational group per se (Kossek & Perrigino, 2016), there are various stress triggers that can be summarized as "leadership stress triggers," for instance, the "loneliness of command" (Quick et al., 2000: 39f.), thus, probably influencing leaders across industries.

Despite the importance of leaders' resilience not only to the leaders themselves, but also to their employees and organizations, and although we know that resilience is context-dependent and findings cannot simply be transferred from one context (e.g., employees) to another (e.g., leaders), hardly any authors have attempted to create a resilience model specific for the leadership context. Furthermore, knowledge is limited about resilience processes, especially in the leadership context. What processes, capabilities, and behaviors help leaders cope effectively with crises? To answer this question, we develop a new model of leaders' resilience. In compliance with the described frameworks, we understand the resilience of leaders as a process dependent not only on individual characteristics (i.e., traits and abilities) but also on environmental features (i.e., factors related to private environments and workplace environments), which together contribute to resilience outcomes (e.g., psychological health and well-being). In detail, we take Cooper et al.'s (2013) workplace resilience framework as well as Kossek and Perrigino's (2016) integrated occupational resilience framework as a foundation and add deeper insights from organizational resilience research into resilience processes. Further, we explain these processes in detail and illustrate their functioning using the COVID-19 situation.

The Leaders' Resilience Model

In order to visualize how leaders deal effectively with a critical situation, we developed a process-oriented model of leaders' resilience (Fig. 2.1). Building on findings from organizational resilience research (Duchek, 2019; Williams et al., 2017), we

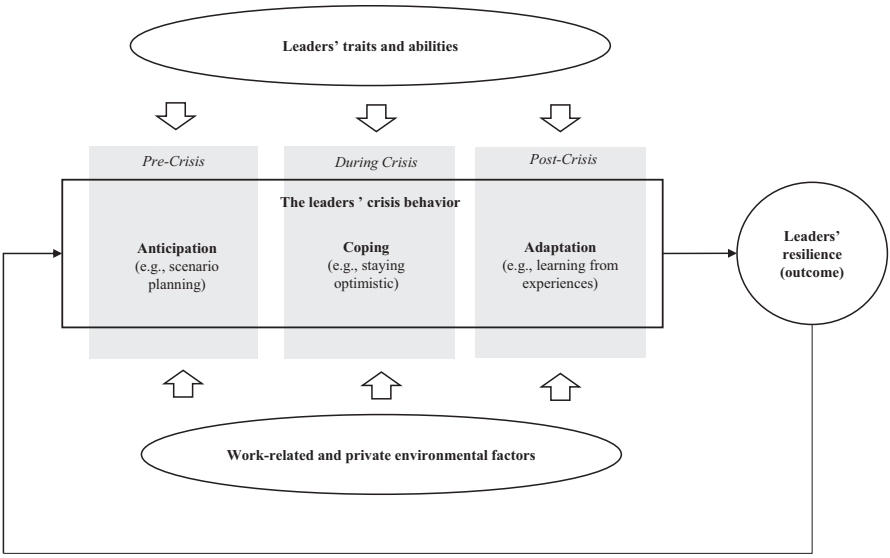

Fig. 2.1 The leaders' resilience model

define three successive stages of the resilience process, i.e., pre-crisis, during crisis, and post-crisis. Since the demands and challenges within these three stages are completely different, the leader must demonstrate specific behaviors to master these stages successfully. In stage one, the leader must anticipate critical developments and prepare for potential crises; in stage two, the leader must cope with an acute crisis situation, and in stage three, the leader must reflect on and learn from the crisis.

Only if the leader is able to anticipate crises, cope with them effectively, and learn from them can he or she reach high levels of resilience. It is not enough to anticipate crises and prepare carefully. The leader must also be able to use developed resources in times of crisis and use crisis experiences to become better afterward. Since leaders' resilience is a dynamic process, the leaders' crisis behavior benefits greatly from prior crisis experience. The broader the knowledge, the better the leader is able to see and understand critical developments as well as act on them. Nevertheless, caution is advised here because crises are hardly always the same. Therefore, the learned behavior must always be critically questioned and adapted to the current crisis; otherwise, it leads to rigidity and arrogance that will not help in any critical situation.

Although the COVID-19 crisis is still not over yet, and leaders must especially demonstrate effective coping behavior, the stages before and after the crisis are equally important to leaders' resilience. This means leaders should also be aware of their anticipation and adaptation capabilities and invest in their enhancement.

In the next sections, we highlight important behaviors needed by leaders to anticipate, cope with, and learn from major crises. We use the COVID-19 crisis to illustrate the different resilience phases, related challenges, and important resilience resources before drawing lessons learned for future leadership practice.

Anticipation

In the first stage ("pre-crisis"), leaders need to anticipate potential crises and make themselves ready. Referring to the COVID-19 crisis, for almost all countries outside Asia, the current crisis was hardly unexpected because China was hit weeks before the virus reached Europe or the U.S. Further, the threat of a global pandemic was definitely far from unexpected, with several warnings from Bill Gates (Gates, 2015) and the World Health Organization (WHO, 2019). The WHO even released a specific guide "to inform and harmonize national and international pandemic preparedness and response" (WHO, 2017: 2; Rouleau et al., 2020). Initially published in 2009, the guide was revised based on the "lessons learned from the influenza A(H1N1) 2009" (WHO, 2017: 8).

To realize threats early, thorough scanning activities, and risk analyses are needed (Faustenhammer & Goessler, 2011). Based on that, leaders can engage in scenario planning and resource building ("slack resources") to get ready. Lessons from past crises have shown that preparation can be essential. In this sense, Coutu (2002) illustrated how the investment bank Morgan Stanley recognized, after the first attack on the World Trade Center in 1993, the danger of operating in a building that had become such a symbol for U.S. commercial power. By introducing a preparation program, including a fire drill that was taken seriously and multiple backup sites, only seven of the 2700 employees working in the south tower died in the terrorist attack in 2001. Even though it is an important fact that the south tower was hit by the second plane only, preparation saved many lives. Referring to the COVID-19 crisis, preparation could have also been crucial to the extent of the crisis. In light of the several pandemic warnings as well as with regard to the requirements of a global and diverse workforce, solutions could have been developed and introduced years ago (e.g., home office regulations, tools for virtual communication, compatibility of work and family life).

Beyond that, leaders need to make themselves mentally ready. This means that leaders, completely aware of the crucial role they have in their team's and their company's resilience, need to engage in resilience-building measures. For this purpose, leaders have to be aware of their strengths and weaknesses. For instance, based on prior crisis experience or simulated crisis situations, leaders should honestly consider what works and what brings them to their limits. The support of an experienced resilience coach might be useful for this task. Subsequently, leaders can expand their resilience, for instance, by using experience-based learning methods (e.g., Kolb, 2014). Learning here is understood as a process in which knowledge is generated through concrete experiences and their transformation. In order to enable this kind of experience, various active learning methods, such as cooperative learning, role play, or simulations, can be used (Snyder, 2003). For instance, a computer-based company simulation could be developed (Gopinath & Sawyer, 1999) in which the leader is confronted with a specific crisis situation and thus can develop crisis behavior strategies.

Coping

In the second stage ("during crisis"), adversity becomes real, which means the leader has to cope with it. Leaders need to remain self-confident and optimistic to manage the situation successfully, especially when it gets tricky (Bossmann et al., 2016; Christman & McClellan, 2008; Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014; Lazaridou & Beka, 2015).

In particular, having a certain level of self-confidence with regard to their own decisions and actions is important; otherwise, leaders will be caught in self-doubts, which will certainly diminish their resilience. Unfortunately, there is always another side of the coin, particularly when it comes to self-confidence. In this sense, being self-confident is undoubtedly crucial for leaders navigating through crisis, but when being overconfident becomes hubris, this harms not only the leaders' resilience but also that of the organization (e.g., Wray, 2016). Referring to the historically greatest corporate scandals, for instance, that of the U.S. company Enron or the decline of Lehman Brothers, several leaders in the past suffered from such hubris (e.g., Wray, 2016). This can easily lead to situations in which a crisis is not assessed correctly and no preparations are made, for example, when corporate leaders did not expect the coronavirus could hit us the same way, or even worse, than China.

Equally, being optimistic is demonstrably important for the leader to stay resilient during the crisis; otherwise, one could give up right away. Nonetheless, being optimistic without a certain sense of reality can be dangerous because it keeps one from taking precautionary measures (Coutu, 2002). In this context, Giustiniano et al. (2020) argued that dealing with highly uncertain and ambiguous situations, such as the current COVID-19 crisis, can lead to contradictory demands. For instance, leaders have to remain optimistic but cannot lose their sense of reality even though staying realistic can certainly be depressing. Depending on what the crisis demands, switching between optimism and realism can be difficult. For the COVID-19 crisis, this could mean leaders need to be optimistic that the pandemic will end soon but also prepare for the fact that it could continue and, thus, always be ready to change the plan.

Further, research shows that not losing one's head even if the house is on fire is of the highest priority to remain resilient during the crisis. Along this line, resilient leaders realize an *effective task fulfillment* by dedicating themselves to a rational, analytical and structured way of working and always considering the possible consequences their actions might have (Foerster & Duchek, 2017; Bossmann et al., 2016). By doing so, leaders are less likely to panic and more likely to keep track and control. As the COVID-19 crisis has shown, decisions made during the crisis were often vital and far-reaching, including some of them even caused strong protest. Therefore, acting in the midst of the crisis and still not losing one's head requires the leader to act in a rational, analytical, and structured way and make decisions thoroughly. Unfortunately, every critical situation also requires that decisions must be made quickly at times. To do that, leaders need to rely on their (crisis) experiences and be guided by their intuition. Considering all the decisions that had to be made during the COVID-19 crisis, being able to decide quickly, thus preventing major

damages, is one of the most important qualities of leaders (Kerrissey & Edmondson, 2020). Nonetheless, being intuitive can also be misleading because sticking too closely to what was learned from prior crises might not be appropriate for managing the current crisis (Reeves et al., 2020). Consequently, to remain resilient during an actual crisis, leaders should trust their gut feelings but always critically question their own knowledge. Further, behaving in a rational, analytical, and structured way can help leaders keep their emotions under control and decide thoroughly.

In addition, leaders should also bear in mind that crises are usually highly sensitive phases that demand a lot from them and their surroundings. Therefore, *professional and private networks* are even more important for leaders in times of crisis. Based on the conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 2002), the positive and moderating effect of social support on work stress has been well documented (Westman & Chen, 2017). Along this line, empirical findings showed that having a reference person within the firm, trust, a positive work climate, support, and appreciation are factors that positively influence leaders' resilience (Foerster & Duchek, 2017). Nonetheless, leaders also experience a certain loneliness, particularly, the higher the leader is in the hierarchy. Thus, several studies pointed to the importance of leaders' networks, where they could exchange with kindred spirits (e.g., Bossmann et al., 2016; Bullough & Renko, 2013; Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014; Foerster & Duchek, 2017; Quick et al., 2000). Due to competitive factors, such an exchange is more difficult when the leaders are operating in the upper echelon and the company gets in trouble. In these situations, leaders can also turn to their private networks consisting of family and long-lasting friends where they can talk openly about problems and get honest feedback (e.g., Christman & McClellan, 2008; Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014; Quick et al., 2000). Thus, private networks become even more important as the situation becomes tougher and when the leader has more responsibility. Bearing the importance of those professional and private networks in mind, leaders in the actual crisis, such as the COVID-19 crisis, should pay special attention to maintaining a good working atmosphere and taking care of their professional and private networks because they are the people who support the leaders in tough times like this. Although the development of such networks usually takes place long before the crisis happens, and thus is normally part of the anticipatory behavior, long-term contacts and work atmosphere can be easily destroyed during a crisis, especially since people in critical situations are in general more susceptible to leaders' failure and tough in their judgments. Therefore, acting empathically and reflectively and communicating openly are beneficial not only to the leaders' resilience but also to the resilience of their teams, their companies, and their families.

Apart from that, *health* is also an important topic of leaders' resilience (e.g., Bossmann et al., 2016; Buell, 2014; Koen et al., 2013; Quick et al., 2000). Especially in times of crisis, leaders might neglect a healthy diet or sports, but doing that is like driving without enough air in the tires—it will exact revenge at some point. Therefore, just drive to the next rest stop and put air in the tires, which means leaders should pay extra attention to not neglect their sports, healthy diet, and relaxation. Although people's normal places for sports, relaxation, or eating were closed in the COVID-19 crisis, there are plenty of possibilities for all this to be done from home.

In this sense, instead of running to the cafeteria as usual, one could go for a run during lunch break, and instead of the common business dinners, cook dinner with the family in the evening. In this context, coping also refers to making the best of the current situation, and even during a crisis, leaders need a break sometimes to recharge their batteries.

Adaptation

During the last stage ("post-crisis"), leaders recover from the crisis and learn from it for the future. Since leaders are often intertwined with their companies, the learning phase takes place with the leaders and their companies. As already addressed in the anticipation phase, leaders should learn from each crisis by reflecting on what went right and what went wrong, and more importantly, what could have been done better (e.g., Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014). Although this requires leaders to be open to criticism and suggestions (e.g., Bullough & Renko, 2013) and take responsibility for their actions (e.g., Lazaridou & Beka, 2015), reflection should occur without a guilty conscience since this hinders learning. Leaders are, as everyone, only human beings trying their best. If leaders act according to this standard, they should not stick to what happened in the past—hindsight is always 20/20—but learn for the future.

Based on reflection and learning, a change in the leader's behavior can occur, in which crises, as recently depicted by Seidl and Whittington (2020), represent specific opportunities to change one's practice. This reflection and learning can, in turn, be particularly beneficial in terms of a possible future crisis. In this sense, every crisis is an opportunity. A potential opportunity arising from the COVID-19 crisis might be the insight that leading from a distance is sometimes possible, and not all business trips are actually required. This could be groundbreaking for the future of leadership. Even though this will certainly create new challenges, it may solve various challenges leaders struggle with today. Leading from home, at least sometimes, enables leaders to spend more time with their families, which could lead to a general improvement in the compatibility of work and family life. Having a solid family foundation also benefits leaders' resilience, thus helping them cope with future adversities. Nonetheless, since leading from a distance and working from home will certainly pose new challenges to leaders, especially to their resilience, these challenges might better be addressed before the next pandemic hits the world.

Conclusion

Based on the explanations above, it becomes clear that the leaders' resilience process is as dynamic as the crisis itself. Thus, leaders need to apply different behavioral strategies in different phases of the crisis. In the following, we summarize what we have learned from the COVID-19 crisis in terms of our leaders' resilience model (see Fig. 2.1) and how leaders can navigate healthily and productively through

crises. Nonetheless, one should be aware that these are generalized behavioral strategies for leaders that must always be examined critically against the background of the actual crisis and the individual leader who wants to apply these strategies.

First, before a crisis even occurs ("pre-crisis"), leaders need to anticipate potential crises and make themselves ready. For this purpose, leaders can apply scanning activities, risk analysis, scenario planning, and resource building, whereby leaders also have to make themselves ready by engaging in resilience-building measures. *Second*, when the crisis becomes real ("during crisis"), leaders have to cope with acute adversities. Leaders can do this by remaining self-confident and optimistic, engaging in an effective task fulfillment, using their professional and private networks, and taking care of their health. Due to the quickly changing demands of the crisis, it is no surprise that necessary behaviors in this phase are sometimes contradictory (Giustiniano et al., 2020). *Third*, when the crisis is over ("post-crisis"), leaders need to recover and learn from the crisis. For this purpose, leaders need to be open to criticism and suggestions, and, more importantly, must be able to convert the gained knowledge into a changed leader's behavior. *Fourth*, the leaders' conscious and unconscious behavioral reactions to crises are certainly influenced by their personalities. However, it does not matter if these underlying individual features are developed through personal or leadership training or available through predisposition. Empirical findings clearly show that the lack of certain innate characteristics (e.g., self-confidence) can be compensated by the development of related skills (e.g., the ability to trust oneself) (Foerster & Duchek, 2017). *Fifth*, the crisis behavior of leaders also depends on their surroundings. In this sense, it is up to leaders to create surroundings in which they feel safe and supported. Even if the work and private environment do not provide an optimum of protective factors, leaders can do the best for themselves (e.g., time outs, sports), especially since research has shown that resilience is influenced by various factors, both work-related and non-work-related (e.g., Kossek & Perrigino, 2016; Cooper et al., 2013). Nonetheless, and in particular, since research has emphasized that individual resilience is not only embedded in the occupational but also the organizational context (Kossek & Perrigino, 2016), organizations should create a resilience-promoting atmosphere, especially in times of crisis. For instance, this can be done by providing flexible work schedules or offering resilience training. Based on our explanations above, this training should consider the three resilience phases since these are the foundation for a holistic leaders' resilience promotion. Only if leaders learn to anticipate potential risks, cope with crises, and adapt afterward are they able to survive crises not only efficiently but also healthily. In order to train these kinds of behavior, various approaches are available, especially experienced-based (Kolb, 2014) and active learning methods (Snyder, 2003). Which training approach is most appropriate depends on the occupational, organizational, and individual context.

Since dealing with unexpected events can be considered a fundamental challenge in daily organizational life (e.g., Linnenluecke, 2017), and future pandemics are more than likely due to our global interdependence (e.g., Li, 2020), learning from the COVID-19 crisis is highly important. Therefore, we pose five reflection questions that might help us learn from the crisis and simultaneously prepare for the

next. First, since most leaders were required to stay at home and rely on online technologies to lead their teams, leaders need to address the question of *how to lead from a distance?*. In this context, a related question could be *What technologies can support me in leading from a distance?*. In addition, leaders need to reflect on the COVID-19 crisis by asking, *What major risks and challenges did I face when leading from a distance, and how can they be met in the future?*. Furthermore, since many leaders were required to stay at home during the COVID-19 crisis and, thus, could not use their homes as a retreat any longer, leaders should consider *how to live and work at home?*. To stay not only efficient but also healthy, leaders need to find ways to separate or combine professional and personal issues as well as discover how to relax when working at home. Finally, since leaders' resilience is a concept that is influenced by both occupational as well as individual factors (Kossek & Perrigino, 2016), leaders need to think about what is important for their personal resilience. Some might need a structured work environment; others might need a chaotic one. Some may need to separate their personal and professional lives; others might appreciate a more flexible but interrelated life. Some need endurance sports, and others need relaxation techniques. What is right for one is far from right for the other. Nonetheless, leaders must ask themselves early, *What helps me build resilience for myself?*.

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