Pandemic on the plains: A study in crisis leadership

by

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AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

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Abstract

Crisis leadership regained importance when the World Health Organization's Director General declared COVID-19 a global pandemic in March 2020 (World Health Organization, 2020). Though some research was emerging, a gap remained regarding an examination of crisis leadership from the perspective of those on the frontline of the pandemic—the municipal leaders. Using narrative inquiry, this study examined the crisis leadership experiences of five civic leaders in a small Midwestern city during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. The research exposed how a crisis situation may generate a disordered environment that resembles the Cynefin Framework's chaotic and complex domains where causal relationships are difficult to establish. The study revealed how the city successfully functioned in a complex environment by leaders adapting and leveraging existing relationships. The findings also identified the impact social media and politicizing an issue could have on the confluence of information and communication efforts, especially for crisis leaders.

Keywords:

Crisis leadership, COVID-19, Cynefin Framework, Communication, Adaptation, Relationships

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Approved by:

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Dedication

I unhesitatingly dedicate this dissertation to my loving wife Kim. Your unfailing support, willingness to proofread my papers, and perpetual encouragement made this accomplishment possible. Your understanding of what it means to be a lifelong learner is inspiring. Let the adventures continue!

Chapter 1 - Introduction

Crises, generated from both human and natural causes, are plentiful throughout the world today. Violence in the Middle East appears incessant with civil wars, economic disasters, and political instability occurring frequently (Hamud, 2021). Similarly, Sub-Saharan Africa has seen an increase in security crises especially in countries such as Somalia, Mozambique, and Tanzania (Husted et al., 2021). Crises spawned by natural disasters such as drought, flooding, severe storms, tropical cyclones, and wildfires cost nations millions of dollars each year (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, 2021). Consequently, human-generated events and natural disasters routinely pose challenges for organizational leaders. While each crisis can be catastrophic, they are often limited in duration or contained to a geographic area. However, some crises appear to be spreading regionally, if not globally. For example, Coltart et al. (2017) note the 2013-2016 Ebola outbreak in West Africa was, "unprecedented in scale, being larger than all previous outbreaks combined, with 28,646 reported cases and 11,323 reported deaths" (p.1). The spread of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) is another example of a health crisis. Initially reported on December 31, 2019 as 27 cases of pneumonia in Wuhan City, China (Sohrabi et al., 2020), COVID-19 spread so rapidly and with such severity that on March 11, 2020 the Director General of the World Health Organization declared, "there are now more than 118,000 cases in 114 countries, and 4,291 people have lost their lives…we have therefore made the assessment that COVID-19 can be characterized as a pandemic" (Ghebreyesus, 2020, p. 1). Although the pandemic was alarming, it provided a unique opportunity to study leadership during a global crisis. Specifically, this study explored the crisis leadership experiences of five civic leaders in a small Midwestern city during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Background

When the global pandemic (COVID-19) began in the late fall of 2019 (Kabir et al., 2020; Mofijur, et al., 2021; Zhou et al., 2020,), the magnitude of the problem was not clear, nor were people certain regarding how to react. The world had not seen a health challenge producing this massive number of deaths (exceeding one million) since the Spanish Flu of 1918 and HIV/AIDS since 1981(Morens et al., 2020). Consequently, by mid-March 2020, cities across the United States began taking precautions to ensure the health of their citizens. Fortunately, a year later, vaccinations were created, distributed, and administered (Mathieu et al., 2021).

Although the study of leadership during a crisis is not new, the examination of organizational leadership during a crisis has received increased interest in the past 30 years. Pearson and Mitroff's (1993) seminal study examined how organizations may contribute to their own demise during a crisis. Their five-phased framework of crisis management consists of "signal detection; preparation, prevention; containment, damage limitation; recovery; and learning" (Pearson & Mitroff, 1993, p. 53). Building upon Pearson and Mitroff's (1993) model, James and Wooten (2005) offered several guiding questions for leadership working through each phase of the crisis. They also examined the leadership competencies exhibited during each phase of the crisis (Wooten & James, 2008). During the signal detection phase, the competencies of sense-making and perspective taking are required. Organizational agility and creativity are necessary during the preparation and prevention phase. During the containment and damages phase, decision making, communicating, and risk taking are necessary. Promoting organizational resilience is required during the business recovery phase. Lastly, learning orientation is required during the learning and reflection phase. Bhaduri (2019) extended Pearson and Mitroff's (1993)

model by examining successful and unsuccessful leadership styles and competencies for each crisis management phase.

Others have approached crisis leadership differently. Recognizing the multiple leadership dimensions that need to be addressed during a crisis, Bonin et al. (2013) distinguished leaders being seen as a necessary dimension, but not sufficient by itself, if the leaders failed to subsequently take appropriate measures to resolve the crisis. Likewise, Helsloot and Groendaal (2017) underscored the importance of leaders being visible by the public in times of crisis in order to appeal to the public needs and begin the healing process. Finally, Bowers et al.'s (2017) crisis response leadership matrix (CRLM) focused on crisis response leadership. While the previously mentioned literature is helpful in addressing internal and external crises to organizations, both from business and natural disaster perspectives, the literature fails to address crisis leadership during a global pandemic.

Next, a brief discussion on city governments will help provide context for the study. Understanding the popular forms of government and where the power resides will enable a greater appreciation of the study's participants and their interactions with the voters.

City Governments

A search of the National League of City's (2022) website identifies five forms of municipal government practiced in the United States: *council-manager, mayor-council, commission, town meeting*, and *representative town meeting*. The two most popular forms of local government are the *council-manager* and the *mayor-council* forms of government, with the *council-manager* form being the most popular (International City/County Management Agency, 2022; National Civic League, 2022). Both forms of government have their advantages and are

practiced in the Midwest. The primary difference between the two forms of government is where the source of power resides.

For example, with the *council-manager* form of government the elected council members are responsible for establishing the community's policies, laws, and regulations and approving the budget. However, with this form of government the council hires a city manager to execute the required daily administrative duties of the community. These duties include developing a budget for the council's approval, hiring the appropriate government staff, serving as chief advisor to the council regarding local operations, and properly executing the policies established by the council. The council supervises the city manager's performance and retains the authority to remove the manager if that person is not performing the assigned duties effectively. In the *council-manager* form of government, the city mayor is often a ceremonial or figure-head position with the primary responsibility of serving as head of the council (International City/County Management Agency, 2022). This form of government is common in cities with populations exceeding 10,000 and very often found in the Southeast and along the Pacific Coast. The cities of Phoenix, Topeka, and San Antonio all exercise this form of municipal government (National Civic League, 2022).

In contrast, power is more centralized with the mayor in a *mayor-council* form of government. The mayor is elected separately from the city council and retains significant budgetary and administrative authorities and serves as the head of the government (International City/County Management Agency, 2022, p. III). With the *mayor-council* form of government, the city council focuses primarily on legislative duties, whereas the mayor is empowered with executive authorities and duties. This form of government is often found in either older, larger

cities, such as New York City or Houston, (National Civic League, 2022) or in very small cities with populations under 5000 (International City/County Management Agency, 2022, p. 1).

In order to understand the nature of the interactions between municipal leaders and voters, a brief review of complexity theory is helpful. Complexity theory examines systems and how order can emerge from the interaction between various parts (Holland, 2014). Although a universally accepted definition for complexity does not exist, complex systems display similar characteristics. For example, complex systems consist of a network of interacting parts that respond to feedback. This means complex systems are adaptive to inputs and can be influenced by the environment. Consequently, complex systems can display both ordered and disordered behaviors and appear to evolve and display emergent phenomena (Johnson, 2007).

A city environment provides several examples of a complex adaptive system. For instance, the exchanges between municipal leaders and voters reflect a network of interacting agents. Citizen compliance, or non-compliance, with COVID-19 safety protocols illustrate an adaptive system with both ordered and disordered behaviors. Also, citizens modifying previously routine behaviors to safely function and operate in a COVID-19 environment reflect adaptation and evolution of the agents (citizens) over time.

These brief discussions on the background for the study and city governments provide the context to further examine the challenge faced by the civic leaders. A review of the problem statement helps establish the scope of the study.

Problem Statement

Numerous scholars (Daniel, 2020; Franchini et al., 2020; Harapan et al., 2020; Mathieu et al., 2021; Meyer et al., 2022; Nicola et al., 2020; Osafo et al., 2019; Pfefferbaum & North, 2020; Phelan et al., 2020; Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021) tried to understand the pandemic's full impact after

the Director General of the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic in March of 2020 (World Health Organization, 2020). Within the first year, Joshi-Ghani (2020), of the World Economic Forum, stated that the pandemic was evolving and identified it as "multi-dimensional, combining health, economic and social crisis" (p. 1). Simply put, the pandemic challenge grew in complexity. Wahba (2021), from the World Bank, further declared that "cities are on the frontlines of this crisis" (p. 2), noting that economic activity was decreasing while infection rates were climbing. Municipal leaders were now on the front line of the pandemic, facing complex challenges in crisis leadership.

Although some scholarly research on the COVID-19 pandemic was starting to emerge, a multiple data base search revealed a clear gap regarding crisis leadership and the pandemic. Specifically, there was paucity in the research regarding the crisis leadership experiences of civic leaders responsible for recommending and making decisions to prevent, contain, and decrease the spread of COVID-19. Therefore, it is imperative that researchers learn as much as possible from those frontline municipal leaders. Lessons from these leaders may help prevent, or at least mitigate, a future pandemic's impact.

To focus the scope of the research within realistic time constraints, this study examined the crisis leadership efforts of a small municipality in the Midwestern United States. The study applied the narrative inquiry methodology to describe the crisis leadership experiences of five civic leaders during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. Their experiences revealed valuable lessons for future consideration. A review of the purpose statement is next.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to explore the leadership experiences of a small city government (population of around 35,000) in the Midwestern United States. Specifically, this

study examined the crisis leadership experiences of five civic leaders responsible for recommending and making decisions to prevent, contain, and decrease the spread of COVID-19 in the city during the pandemic.

Research Questions

Through narrative inquiry, this study explored the crisis leadership experiences of five government officials in a small city in the Midwestern United States. The primary research question guiding this study was: What themes emerged from this study of crisis leadership during the COVID crisis from March 11, 2020, to March 31, 2021?

The three research sub-questions were:

1. How did the civic leaders describe their crisis leadership experiences regarding decision making efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. How did the civic leaders describe their crisis leadership experiences regarding communication efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic?
3. What ways did the civic leaders develop a sense of understanding from their interactions with state officials, fellow civic leaders, and citizens of the municipality during the pandemic?

Overview of Methodology

This research was a qualitative study using narrative inquiry for its methodology and constructivism for the theoretical framework. Two leading scholars on narrative inquiry, Clandinin and Connelly (2000), define narrative inquiry as "a way of understanding experience" (p. 20). Additional scholars also identify narrative inquiry as a useful method for examining experiences. For example, Chase (2013) notes "narrative inquiry revolves around an interest in life experiences as narrated by those who live them" (p. 56). She further adds "narrative researchers highlight what we can learn about anything—history and society as well as lived

experiences—by maintaining a focus on narrated lives" (p. 56). Bhattacharya (2017) describes narrative inquiry as "a framework that helps researchers explore, discover, understand, and construct stories base on the participants' recounting of their experiences" (p. 93). Simply put, narrative inquiry is a useful qualitative methodology for those interested in examining a particular experience. One of the characteristics of narrative inquiry is the involvement of the researcher as part of the interview and data collection process which will be discussed in a later chapter.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) acknowledge their work is heavily influenced by the writings of American philosopher John Dewey (1938), who wrote of the "organic connection between education and personal experience" (p. 25). From Dewey's perspective, experience and learning were intertwined and inseparable. Dewey (1938) also coined the term *experiential continuum* noting "every experience lives on in further experiences" (p. 27) meaning each experience adds to the cognitive framework by which future experiences are viewed and understood. Dewey (1938) believed that experiences did not occur in isolation, but rather were social events that involved "contact and communication" (p. 38). He noted "the conceptions of situation and interaction are inseparable from each other. An experience is always what it is because of a transaction taking place between an individual and what, at the time, constitutes his environment" (p. 43). Hence, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) expound that narrative inquiry is a "collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus" (p. 20). Together, these three elements (participants, time, and place) delineate the three-dimensional space by which narrative inquiry is defined. The narrative inquiry methodology was well suited for this study since the purpose of the research was to examine a particular experience of select participants at a particular time and place. The

particular experience was the crisis leadership experiences of five government officials (participants); during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, March 11, 2020, to March 31, 2021 (time); at a small city in the Midwestern United States (place).

Constructivism provided the theoretical framework for this study. Merriam and Bierema (2014) note "constructivism is less a single theory of learning than a collection of perspectives all of which share the common assumption that learning is how people make sense of their experience—learning is the construction of meaning from experience" (p. 36). Crotty (1998) notes "constructivism describes the individual human subject engaging with objects in the world and making sense of them" (p. 79). Three notable theorists who influenced constructivist thinking are Jean Piaget, John Dewey, and Lev Vygotsky. Piaget's (1952) theory of cognitive development describes how one's thinking becomes more advanced as they mature, therefor enabling greater understanding. Dewey (1938), as discussed earlier, noted that experience was inextricably linked to learning and consisted of the three elements of the individual, at a specific time, at a specific place. Vygotsky (1978) stressed the importance of the sociocultural context and how it enabled people to make meaning from experiences. Hence, the constructivist approach provided the theoretical framework through which this study examined how the civic leaders constructed meaning from the crisis leadership experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Narrative inquiry involves inductive analysis. Consequently, this type of analysis relies on interpretations by the researcher to derive concepts and themes based on data collected from interviews, observations, and examined documents. Merriam (1998) notes, "data analysis is the process of making sense out of the data which involves consolidating, reducing, and interpreting what people have said and what the researcher has seen and read—it is the process of making meaning" (p. 178). Bhattacharya (2017) notes one assumption during the process of inductive

analysis is that “the researcher is not starting the data analysis with any kind of pre-established testable hypothesis about the data” (p. 150). The researcher used an iterative process of reviewing and examining data looking for codes, categories, and themes. It was also important to identify what was not specifically stated by the participants since this might have been as important as what was articulated. Bhattacharya (2017) suggests looking for “silences, contradictions, and tensions” (p. 151).

Interviews provided a rich data source for this study and can range from formal semi-structured interviews to natural conversations (Bhattacharya, 2017). This study used semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions to document personal narration (Appendix A). The research was conducted online, via Zoom, for four of the five civic leaders based on the participant’s scheduling availability. One participant preferred being interviewed in the privacy of his home. All research was conducted in the private office spaces of the participants and the researcher.

Population

The study selected five individuals from a small municipal government in the Midwestern United States who were involved in emergency management decision-making. Specifically, this research examined a municipal government in the Midwest that used the council-manager form of government. Convenience sampling was used since the subjects were selected from a municipality that was easily accessible to the researcher.

Rationale

The rationale for this study was to provide a comparative data point for themes that emerged from the study of crisis leadership. Particular interest was given regarding how civic leaders construct meaning, make decisions, and communicate. The findings may prompt new

questions for research regarding critical decision making and communication efforts. This study may also influence the emergency management field regarding considerations to safeguard a local community during a future pandemic.

Significance

The significance of this research was to better understand the crisis leadership experiences of selected civic officials during a crisis. The study expands upon the previous research concerning decision-making and communication during a crisis (French & Niculae, 2004; Higgins & Freedman, 2013). This research also provides comparative data points for future crisis leadership studies.

Assumptions

The following assumptions were made for the purpose of this study. The civic leaders were truthful in responding to questions. Civic leaders also provided an accurate representation of crisis leadership decisions made and communication efforts taken during the COVID-19 pandemic to protect the city's population.

Limitations

There were a few limitations associated with this study. The first limitation was the time period examined during the study. Due to time constraints, only the first year of the pandemic was examined. Consequently, this narrow period only considered the impact of the pandemic during the crisis period. It did not review the pre- or post-crisis periods. The limited number of interview participants, while sufficient for a narrative inquiry, may be considered a small sample size by some researchers. The participants were selected based on their duty position as civic leaders within the designated organization. The truthfulness of the participant responses was also a limitation. Yin (2018) notes a weakness of interviews is "reflexivity—e.g., interviewee says

what interviewer wants to hear" (p. 114). Conversely, if the information conveyed reflects poorly on a personal decision or the organization, the participant might be reluctant to reveal whole truths. To minimize this limitation, interviews were conducted in a relaxed and non-threatening environment. Confidentiality was also used to reduce reluctance.

Definitions and Key Terminology

The following definitions and key terms were used for the purpose of this study.

Crisis: an inflection point in a system or situation, resulting in significant consequences which may threaten the existing status quo or livelihood of an organization.

Crisis Leadership: "the capability to lead under extreme pressure" (James and Wooten, 2011, p. 61).

Complex Systems: Although there is no universally accepted definition for complexity, complex systems display several similar characteristics. For example, complex systems consist of a network of interacting parts (agents) that respond to feedback. A complex system is adaptive to input and is therefore influenced by its environment. Complex systems can also display both ordered and disordered behaviors and will appear to evolve and display emergent phenomena (Johnson, 2007).

Cynefin Framework: a sense-making device to help understand complexity (Kurtz & Snowden, 2003).

Council-Manager Form of Government: a form of government where the elected council members are responsible for establishing the community's policies, laws, and regulations and approving the budget. With this form of government, the council hires a city manager to execute the required daily administrative duties of the community (International City/County Management Agency, 2022).

Mayor-Council Form of Government: a form of government where the mayor is elected separately from the city council and retains significant budgetary and administrative authorities and serves as the head of the government (International City/County Management Agency, 2022).

Summary

Though some research on the COVID-19 pandemic was beginning to emerge, a gap remained regarding an examination of the crisis leaders on the front line of the pandemic—the municipal leaders. This study explored the critical leadership experiences of five civic leaders charged with making decisions to protect citizens and communities in a complex city environment. Narrative inquiry was the research methodology selected. The COVID-19 pandemic phenomenon was examined from the humanistic perspective of the civic leaders' critical leadership experiences and the study searched for themes that emerged from the data. These themes provided comparative data points for future crisis leadership studies.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

The purpose of this review is to provide a summary of the relevant literature that informed this study of crisis leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic. Since it is only a few years since COVID-19 first emerged from China in the late fall of 2019 (Kabir et al, 2020; Mofijur et al., 2021; Zhou et al., 2020), scholarly research on the COVID-19 pandemic is just now starting to emerge. This research examined the critical leadership experiences of five civic officials responsible for recommending and making decisions to prevent, contain, and decrease the spread of COVID-19 in a small city in the Midwestern United States.

Chapter two is arranged in a manner that provided context and clarity for this study. The chapter begins with a review of the data base search results, followed by a brief discussion of the significance of the pandemic's impact. This is followed by the definitions of a crisis, crisis leadership, competencies required during a crisis, various crisis frameworks and initial lessons from the pandemic. The last section reviews complexity theory and the Cynefin Framework which is a sense-making device to help understand complexity.

Data Base Searches

Multiple data bases proved helpful with identifying relevant literature including EBSCOhost - ERIC (Education Resource Information Center), ProQuest, SCOPUS, and JSTOR. Search terms and Boolean operators included *crisis leadership* AND *COVID-19* AND *city government* AND *United States*. Initial inclusion criteria included articles from peer-reviewed journals written after May of 2019. While multiple articles contained relevant search words, very few were germane to this study. This highlighted the gap in literature due to the recency of the pandemic.

The search began using ProQuest and the initial search phrase *crisis leadership.* Search materials included books, conference papers, proceedings, reports, scholarly journals, and trade journals. The search was limited to the English language. The initial examination produced 9407 matches. The search term *COVID-19* was added which reduced the match list to 3017 results. Consequently, the term *city government* was added, which reduced the quest to 1034 matches. The search was further refined by adding the term *United States* which produced 836 results. From these 836 matches, 6 articles were determined favorable. Keeping the same four search terms and Boolean operators of *crisis leadership* AND *COVID-19* AND *city government* AND *United States*, a review with SCOPUS produced only two articles. A review using JSTOR produced 21 matches, although none was suitable. The search using EBSCOhost-ERIC produced three articles of potential use. Consequently, the literature review expanded to pre-pandemic works that concentrated on prominent authors who helped provide a definition for crisis leadership, frameworks for identifying and managing a crisis, as well as required leadership competencies. Of the leadership competencies, special emphasis was placed on decision-making and communication.

Although the search results for the topic of interest for this study produced very little; this was not unexpected. In a similar search, Zafar et al. (2021) attempted to conduct a systematic literature review regarding leadership in times of natural crisis between the years of 2005 to 2020. However, Zafar et al.'s (2021) efforts discovered only 34 articles relevant to the search which reinforced the inquiry's finding of a significant lack of leadership studies pertaining to pandemics. Both attempts, Zafar et al.'s (2021) and this literature search, identified a clear gap in research for this topic and reinforced the need for studies like these to be conducted and published.

Significance of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Since the Director General of the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic in March of 2020 (World Health Organization, 2020), scholars in numerous fields ranging from business (Meyer et al., 2022), to education (Daniel, 2020; Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021), to healthcare (Franchini et al., 2020; Harapan et al., 2020; Mathieu et al., 2021.; Nicola et al., 2020; Osafo et al., 2019; Pfefferbaum & North, 2020; Phelan et al., 2020) attempted to understand the pandemic's full impact. For example, in November 2020, Joshi-Ghani (2020), of the World Economic Forum, noted the pandemic was still evolving but identified that it was "multi-dimensional, combining health, economic and social crisis" (p. 1). He further noted "the World Bank estimates that some 100 million people have been pushed back into poverty, wiping out much of the gains of the last few years" (p. 1). A month later Berube (2020) of the Brookings Institute identified that each wave of the pandemic in the United States affected a different part of the country. The first wave hit New York and New England the hardest and the second wave "mostly affected metro areas in the South and West" (p. 1). The third wave was "hammering the Midwest" (p. 1) concluding that "a robust economic recovery is not in the near-term forecast" (p. 4). In March 2021 Wahba (2021), the Global Director for the World Bank's Urban, Disaster Risk Management, Resilience and Land Global Practice, noted "cities are on the frontlines of this crisis, with dwindling economic activity, high rates of infection and inadequate resources" (p. 2). By December 2021 Parker et al. (2021) of the Pew Research Center revealed findings from surveys indicating "Americans are less likely than before CIVID-19 to want to live in cities, more likely to prefer suburbs" (p. 1). The surveys also revealed "there's a mix of views in their community on key approaches for mitigating COVID-19" (p. 13). People surveyed had a range of opinions on the topics of receiving the COVID-19 vaccination, wearing masks in public, and

accepting additional limitations and restrictions on public activity. The challenges the pandemic presented to civic governments were daunting and tested their abilities to lead during a crisis. Therefore, it was imperative that researchers seized the opportunity to learn as much as possible in their fields to prevent, or at least mitigate a future pandemic's impact. Consequently, this study examined the crisis leadership efforts of a small municipality in the Midwestern United States to formulate lessons learned and best practices for future consideration.

Definitions

Clarifying definitions enables a reader with a common understanding of terms used throughout a study. This section addresses the various uses of the term *crisis* and provides a definition germane for this study. The section also addresses the difference between *crisis leadership* and *crisis management*. Although these terms are often used interchangeably, there is a distinction from the perspective of focus—crisis leaders focus on the future, whereas crisis managers focus on the past. The following paragraphs will elaborate.

Definition of a Crisis

The Oxford English Dictionary (n.d.) defines crisis as "a vitally important or decisive stage in the progress of anything; a turning-point; also, a state of affairs in which a decisive change for better or worse is imminent; now applied especially to times of difficulty, insecurity, and suspense in politics or commerce" (Oxford English, n.d.). Shrivastava (1993), in his study defines a crisis as a "disruptive situation characterized by urgency of decisions, large impacts, and system restructuring" (p. 25). This definition conveys a temporal factor as well as the magnitude of the situation. Along a similar vein, Weick (1988) characterizes a crisis from the perspectives of probability and consequences noting, "crises are characterized by low probability/high consequence events that threaten the most fundamental goals of an

organization" (p. 305). Prewitt et al. (2011) define a crisis as "an unexpected, dramatic, and unprecedented event that forces an organization into chaos and may destroy the organization without urgent and decisive action" (p. 60). Given these various definitions of a crisis, for this research, a crisis is defined as *an inflection point in a system or situation, resulting in significant consequences which may threaten the existing status quo or livelihood of an organization*. Those who can lead an organization through this inflection point are considered crisis leaders.

Difference between Crisis Management and Crisis Leadership

Noting that crisis leadership is a frame of mind, James and Wooten (2011) define crisis leadership as "the capability to lead under extreme pressure" (p. 61). The authors also identify the nature of a crisis consisting of an unusual circumstance, surrounded by incomplete or confusing information, which is exacerbated by compressed timelines, a lack of complete understanding, a strong demand for immediate action, all while being observed. Further elaborating on the mindset of a crisis leader, James and Wooten (2011) identify five necessary leader characteristics: "a propensity to reflect, learn, and adapt; scanning and seeing possibilities; quick and ethical decision making; establishing trust; and believing that opportunities can be obtained" (pp. 61-63). This last point of believing opportunities can be obtained differentiates the difference between crisis management and crisis leadership. Crisis managers typically seek to return to the pre-crisis status quo and are thus historically focused; whereas crisis leaders seek opportunities to improve the organization and are future oriented. Shrivastava (1993) alludes to this noting that past crisis management trends were reactive in nature that focused on responding to the incident, maintaining public relations, and returning to the pre-crisis status quo as quickly as possible. He identifies the future crisis management trend shifting towards an anticipatory mindset that takes a systems approach to ensure the organization has the requisite skills and

capabilities to deal with a crisis when it occurs. James and Wooten (2011) advance the idea of shifting from crisis management to crisis leadership by noting the opportunities presented during a crisis. The authors identify that a crisis presents opportunities for systematic improvements and a chance to address important items previously ignored. Simply put, crisis managers focus on the past (pre-crisis), whereas crisis leaders focus on the future (how the organization can improve).

Competencies Required for a Crisis

Some authors (Du Plessis & Keyter, 2020) have attempted to examine the most suitable leadership style to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic; however, this remained an item of conjecture since the pandemic was still ongoing when the study was conducted. Although Du Plessis and Keyter (2020) endorse the adaptive leadership approach, the authors readily admit, "only history will tell whether such a leadership approach was the right one to follow" (p.72). Nevertheless, what can be examined are the competencies required during a crisis. These competencies will vary depending on the author and can be broadly categorized into three areas: *awareness* of the crisis, *actions* taken by the leader, and *learning* resulting from the event. For example, Wooten and James (2008) identify five phases of leadership competencies in times of crisis as "signal detection, prevention and preparation, containment and damages, business recovery, and learning and reflection" (p. 364). Signal detection involves sense-making and understanding various perspectives of the problem. Prevention and preparation include midlevel managers highlighting important issues that senior managers may have overlooked, organizational agility, and creativity. Containment and damages involve decision making under pressure, communicating effectively, and risk taking. Business recovery deals with promoting organizational resilience and acting with integrity. Finally, learning and reflection are conducted to influence and refine signal detection, prevention, and preparation efforts for the future.

Although Wooten and James (2008) write about a crisis in a business setting, the phases of the leadership competencies can apply to crises that are either man-made or resulting from natural disasters. As previously mentioned, the focus of this study was the COVID-19 pandemic which more closely aligns with natural, vice man-made, disasters.

Boin (2009) also identifies five executive-level tasks during a crisis consisting of preparation, sense-making, managing networks, providing answers, and learning while operating. He notes the challenges associated with preparation include expenses, the difficulty of preparing for an unknown, and the political tensions regarding who will ultimately be held accountable for what occurred. Boin (2009) further elaborates that making sense of an emerging crisis is hard to recognize because the signals are often weak, contradictory, or complex in nature. The author views modern crisis response from a network perspective, but laments that unfortunately some of the critical organizations needed during a crisis do not routinely work together. He clearly stresses the need for leaders to communicate not only what is happening during a crisis, but also what the leadership is doing to help manage the crisis. The final executive-level task is to learn while operating. Bonin (2009) notes this challenge is amplified if it is a leader in a government position since government officials are not only expected to repair what went wrong, but also to determine how to prevent another similar crisis in the future. The challenge, he notes, is that organizations are typically poor learners.

In a later crisis leadership study based on Hurricane Katrina, Boin et al. (2010) identifies effective leaders can recognize emerging threats, initiate appropriate actions, and return conditions to a sense of normalcy once the crisis has passed. These three aspects align with the three broad categories mentioned earlier: awareness, action, and learning. The exception being the last category of learning vice re-establishing a sense of normalcy.

In a similar line of thought, Prewitt and Weil (2011) note one positive result from a crisis is the opportunity for organizational growth. This growth is generated by the sense of discomfort produced by the crisis. While it is true that dissatisfaction with the status quo is an important aspect of organizational transformation, it is only one aspect. As Harvard Business School professor Michael Beer (1987) identifies, along with *dissatisfaction* the organization also requires a *vision* for the future and a determined *process* to help manage the change. In other words, dissatisfaction alone is necessary, but not sufficient to help drive organizational change. For an organization to truly learn and grow from a crisis, it requires strong leadership who can help change the pre-crisis mindsets of the employees and perpetuate future growth.

As noted earlier, the three broad competencies of a crisis leader are *awareness*, *action*, and *learning*. Two important aspects of the *action* competency are decision making and communicating. Each are discussed further.

Decision Making

In order for leaders to make decisions, they have to make sense of what is happening. Weick et al. (2005) note sense-making requires understanding what is occurring well enough to describe the situation to others and develop a plan of action. Similarly, Maitlis and Sonenshein (2010) note sense-making is a process of social construction that identifies various cues and assigns meaning from existing models and frameworks. Once the cues and frameworks are aligned, a solution can be formulated for action. The decision maker's challenge is connecting the right cues and the proper frames to accurately understand what is occurring.

During a crisis, a leader has multiple factors to contend with when making decisions. Oroszi, (2018) identifies three distinct factors of a crisis—time, risk, and decisions. Time is typically compressed, the risks are high, and the decisions often have second and third order

effects. Therefore, decisions often need to be executed quickly and correctly or run the chance of making things worse. Addressing the issue of the time-sensitive nature of a crisis, Hartwell (2022) notes leaders often satisfice and rely on heuristics to make decisions. Whereas Crayne and Medeiros (2021) acknowledge faulty sensemaking efforts can actually "exacerbate crisis conditions and lead to catastrophic outcomes" (p. 2). The risks can be even higher for public and elected officials who are charged with protecting the lives and businesses of their citizens. Comfort et al. (2020) contribute to the argument by identifying four basic functions of crisis decision-making as: *cognition, communication, coordination,* and *control*. These four functions align with the previous discussions on awareness and action and emphasize the importance of communication during the process. However, with the authors listing the fourth function as *control*, this construct reflects a more crisis management approach rather than a crisis leadership approach which incorporates organizational learning as an aspect to prevent or at least mitigate future crises. The other significant aspect of the action competency is the importance of communication during a crisis which is discussed next.

Communication

Communicating effectively is a critical skill for leaders to demonstrate during a time of crisis. In their study on communication in times of crisis, Stam et al. (2018) explain that followers turn to those in charge for guidance with an expectation the leaders will effectively communicate how to negotiate the difficult times. This idea of communicating effectively to guide an organization through a crisis is reinforced by Fischer et al.'s (2016) study on communication barriers which note it is imperative to disseminate critical information in a timely manner, especially to those organizations responsible for crisis response. Fischer et al. (2016)

further elaborate on the barriers to communication by categorizing them as technological, organizational, and social barriers.

Technological barriers correspond to problems based on the *technology used* for crisis management. Technological barriers include infrastructure failures (an example is storm damage), communication means between organizations that do not interface properly, and the impact of social media which includes rumors, unreliable information, and a reliance on one-way communication. (Fischer et al., 2016).

Organizational barriers arise *between* and *within* organizations during crisis management. Organizational barriers include different lexicons between organizations, different goals, a lack of trust between organizations, and different bureaucratic policies, rules, and norms that may be restrictive (Fischer et al., 2016). Unfortunately, the organizational barriers may not be readily apparent in advance but become manifest when different organizations are required to work together for the first time. Pre-crisis planning or crisis-response exercises are two ways organizations can mitigate organizational barriers. These events allow the crisis response agencies to identify and work through friction points that would otherwise remain dormant until an actual crisis.

Social barriers in communication arise because the *differences among individuals* in the various crisis response organizations or the public who are receiving information during each phase of the crisis (pre-crisis, crisis, post-crisis). Examples of social barriers include differences in languages, a lack of trust between crisis responders, a voluntary filtering of messages between organizations, misinterpreting important messages, information overload, or a low confidence in the information received. (Fischer et al., 2016).

Seeger (2006) takes a grounded theoretical approach to examine crisis communication resulting in a list of ten best practices:

- process approaches and policy development
- pre-event planning
- partnership with the public
- listening to the public's concern and understanding the audience
- honesty, candor, and openness
- collaborating and coordinating with credible sources
- meeting the needs of the media and remaining accessible
- communicating with compassion, concern, and empathy
- accepting uncertainty and ambiguity
- convey messages of self-efficacy

The first consideration is *process approaches* and *policy development* which includes incorporating concerns for public relations and issue management as part of the decision-making process and not delegating the two areas to a staff function. Seeger (2006) notes "communication should not merely be involved in communicating decisions about risk and crisis after they have been made" (p. 236). Next is *pre-event planning* which identifies risks in advance and other measures that might be taken to mitigate the risk. This involves the organization conducting an honest assessment of the potential hazards and risks that currently exist so expectations can be managed. *Partnerships with the public* are considered from the perspective of the public has a right to know what is occurring during a crisis. Seeger (2006) acknowledges "accepting the public as a legitimate and equal partner emerged from the literature as a best practice in crisis communication" (p. 238). Likewise *listening to the public's concerns* and *understanding the*

audience are critical in determining how an organization can and should respond accordingly. *Honesty, candor, and openness* are highly encouraged to demonstrate full transparency and maintain trust. *Collaborating and coordinating with credible sources* is fostered by developing a network of experts before a crisis occurs. *Meeting the needs of the media and remaining accessible* is achieved by leveraging the media as an important strategic partner that enables effective communication. In essence, developing a symbiotic relationship with the media is an effective approach that can be beneficial to both the organization and the media. *Communicating with compassion, concern, and empathy* are effective ways an organization can demonstrate it cares about what is occurring. Seeger (2006) adds "these characteristics significantly enhance the credibility of the message and enhance the perceived legitimacy of the messenger both before and after an event" (p. 241). *Accepting uncertainty and ambiguity* is achieved by noting that the nature of a crisis can be ambiguous and generate feelings of uncertainty. Although these conditions are not pleasant, acknowledging their presence can help manage expectations. Finally, it is important for organizations to convey *messages of self-efficacy* by communicating to the public actions they can take to help mitigate the crisis. Although these ten practices may not prevent a crisis, the practices at least provide a pathway forward for an organization during the dark days of a crisis.

In their study on how governments manage crisis communication, Liu et al. (2020) identify five attributes of successful crisis leaders: perceptiveness, humility, flexibility, presence, and cooperation. The authors also note that although crisis leadership emphasizes the need for communication, the messaging is often focused on managing the image or reputation of the organization. An example is Fink's (2013) definition of crisis communication, "managing the perception of that same reality. It is telling the public what is going on (or what you want the

public to know about what is going on). It is shaping public opinions" (p. 8). This statement is not intended to degradate Fink's credibility by any means. He rose to prominence as part of the crisis action team that helped manage Pennsylvania's Three Mile Island nuclear crisis of 1979. Rather, Fink's (2013) definition highlights an emphasis on damage control.

Protecting an organization's reputation is also addressed by Coombs's (2007) situational crisis communication theory. Using empirical research, Coombs (2007) develops a framework to anticipate how stakeholders might react to a crisis when an organization's reputation is threatened and offers suggestions on how to mitigate the impact of a crisis. By addressing stakeholder needs first, the organization can then shift efforts to restoring the organization's reputation. Three key aspects of anticipating stakeholder perceptions are the *type of crisis*, the *crisis history*, and *prior relationships* between the organization and the stakeholders (p. 167). The situational crisis communication theory bins the types of crises into three broad categories: victim (such as natural disasters), accidental (such as technical glitches), and intentional (such as human error) which may have been deliberate. The crisis history is determined by whether the organization has experienced this type of crisis previously. Finally, how well the organization dealt with concerns of the stakeholders in the past will determine the strength of the relationship. Coombs (2007) offers that understanding the *type* and *history* of a crisis along with the existing *relationship* with the stakeholders can help an organization determine guidelines for effective communication during a crisis.

Lee et al.'s (2017) literature review of enablers in crisis information management broadly categorizes publications in one of three categories: *information collection*, *communication*, and *collaboration*. *Information collection* includes crisis recognition, *communication* includes both to and within the public, and *collaboration* includes various crisis response organizations as well as

sense making efforts. Lee et al. (2017) also note the effectiveness of Twitter as a social media technical enabler.

In a subsequent publication, Coombs (2015) notes the goal of crisis management is to prevent or mitigate the results of a crisis and protect the organization and stakeholders. He describes crisis management as a process and categorizes it into four areas with a corresponding communication focus for each: *prevention*, *preparation*, *response*, and *revision* (p. 5). *Prevention* includes early warning and other actions taken to avert the crisis. A news station's severe weather report is an example. *Preparation* involves prior planning in the event of a crisis. For instance, identifying an organization's potential vulnerabilities, designating a crisis action team, and selecting a spokesperson in the event of a crisis reflect preparation efforts. *Response* occurs after the crisis takes place and includes implementation of the crisis action plan that was developed during the preparation phase. Coombs (2015) notes, "response is very public during an actual crisis" (p. 5) and organizations receive intense scrutiny both internally and externally. It is during crisis response when communications are crucial to not only convey what has occurred, but also to help manage expectations and mitigate any perceived damage to the organization's reputation. Recovery and an attempt to return to normalcy is also included during crisis response. Lastly, *revision* involves an organization's assessment of response efforts to glean insights to prevent, become better prepared, and respond more effectively in a future crisis. Simply put, revision is when organizational reflection and learning occur. This brief description illustrates not only how Coombs's (2015) four crisis management categories build on each other but also how the categories are interrelated. Coombs (2015) also suggests this crisis management process can be extended further by reviewing various crisis frameworks.

Crisis Frameworks

Over the past five decades, several authors (Fink, 1986; Pearson & Mitroff, 1993; Sellnow & Seeger, 2013; Turner, 1976) have offered frameworks to help describe the events associated with a crisis. In a general sense, each model describes a crisis occurring in three stages *before*, *during*, and *after* a crisis. What exactly occurs during each stage depends on the various models. What follows is a discussion of the different frameworks presented in a chronologic sequence based on date of publication.

Sociologist Barry A. Turner (1976) uses a six-stage sequence of events to describe a crisis in which he attributes crises to a "failure of foresight" (p. 381). The stages are:

- normal starting point
- incubation period
- precipitating events
- onset
- rescue and salvage
- full cultural readjustment

During the first stage, *normal starting point*, culturally accepted norms, laws and practices are acknowledged. The second stage is the *incubation period* where those items that may challenge the norm or status quo remain undetected. Stage three is described as *precipitating events* that draw attention to that which will challenge accepted norms. The fourth stage, *onset*, occurs immediately after the accepted norms are challenged and the "collapse of cultural precautions become apparent" (p. 381). Stage five is the *rescue and salvage phase* where immediate actions are taken following the collapse. The sixth and final stage, *full cultural readjustment*, occurs when an assessment is made and adjustments to newly accepted norms occur. Not surprisingly,

Turner's (1976) six-stage model logically resembles Kuhn's (1970) book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions,* in that an anomaly is discovered which cannot be explained by existing paradigms and theories. This theoretical failure leads to a crisis within the scientific community which produces new or emerging theories to explain the anomaly. The crisis is resolved by one of three ways: the anomaly is disproved by existing normal science, the scientific community of practice acknowledges it does not have necessary tools to deal with the anomaly and sets it aside for later consideration, or a paradigm war ensues within the community of practice. If the new paradigm/theory can adequately explain the anomaly and is accepted by the community of practice, it is then considered a scientific revolution (Kuhn, 1970). The parallels between this model and Turner's (1976) are the pre-crisis accepted norms, a challenge to the existing norms (literally a crisis), and a post-crisis adjustment to the new norms.

Following Turner's (1976) six-stage model, Fink (1986) developed a four-stage model that uses a chronic disease metaphor to explain the stages of a crisis: *prodromal, acute, chronic*, and *crisis resolution*. The *prodromal* stage describes the precrisis stage where early signs or symptoms of a crisis begin to emerge. The next stage is the *acute* crisis stage which is described as a point of no return, meaning that an event has occurred and there is some damage. How much damage ensues depends on how the crisis is managed. The third stage is the *chronic* crisis stage where the post-mortem occurs. It is during this stage when analysis and recovery happens. The last stage is the *crisis resolution* stage where the crisis is resolved. Although this final stage is the goal of the first three stages, Fink (1986) points out, "a crisis sufferer almost never has the luxury of dealing exclusively with one crisis at a time" (p. 25). Consequently, the optimal state is to identify the crisis in the *prodromal* stage and quickly transition to the *crisis resolution* stage. In other words, identify and resolve the crisis as early as possible.

Pearson and Mitroff (1993) expand on Fink's (1986) model by adding a fifth phase their crisis management model. The five stages for Pearson and Mitroff's (1993) model are *signal detection, preparation/prevention, containment/damage limitation, recovery,* and *learning*. This model assumes a more proactive posture of detection and prevention. If prevention is not possible, the desire is to contain and limit the severity of the damage. Following recovery, the important phase of learning is added as the final phase to assist in early warning or detection for future crises.

James and Wooten (2005) build upon Pearson and Mitroff's (1993) five-stage model by offering several questions that correspond with each phase. For example, during the signal detection phase, the questions focus on the organization's vulnerabilities and existing practices that might lead to a crisis. Organizational systems and policies are also considered regarding whether they may contribute to a potential crisis. The questions for the second phase, preparation/prevention, consider plans, resources, infrastructure, and the organization's readiness mentality enabling it to respond to a crisis. During the third phase, containment/damage control, the questions concentrate on whether "the organization is positioned to implement a strategy for limiting damage during a crisis" (p. 145). Information management regarding the crisis and informing stakeholders is also considered. The business recovery phase involves questions oriented on both the short- and long-term recovery plans following the crisis. Questions for the last phase, learning and reflecting, focus on how the organization can learn from the crisis event by reflecting on past mistakes and behaviors and developing an organizational "memory to prevent future crises" (p. 145).

Sellnow and Seeger (2013) provide the most concise crisis framework consisting of just three stages: pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis. Although only consisting of three stages, all the

stages from the preceding models can be binned into one of the three categories. For example, the pre-crisis stage would include Turner's (1976) *normal*, *incubation*, and *precipitation* stages; Fink's (1986) *prodromal* stage, and Pearson and Mitroff's (1993) *signal detection*, and *preparation/prevention* stages. The *crisis* stage includes Turner's (1976) *onset* stage, Fink's (1986) *acute* and *chronic* stages, and Pearson and Mitroff's (1993) *containment/damage limitation* stage. The final, *post-crisis* stage includes Turner's (1976) *rescue* and *salvage* stages along with *cultural readjustment*; Fink's (1986) *crisis resolution* stage; and Pearson and Mitroff's (1993) *recovery* and *learning* stages.

This brief chronologic review of the various frameworks for a crisis demonstrates the three broad stages of a crisis and establishes a foundation for future discussions. The review also highlights a transition from a reactionary to a more proactive posture for crisis management and crisis leadership. While both the Turner (1976) and Fink (1986) models attempt to understand and explain the anomaly that caused the crisis, Pearson and Mittroff's (1993) model demonstrates an effort to learn from the crisis and prevent or limit the effects of a future crisis. Sellnow and Seeger's (2013) model reflects the benefits of almost four decades of research allowing various models to be grouped into three all-encompassing stages of a crisis—before, during, and after.

Initial Lessons from the Pandemic

In an effort to disseminate best leadership practices initially emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic, Kaul et al. (2020) offered six principles of leadership in a crisis used by effective leaders: "communication, decision-making, humanism, innovation, realism, and core values" (p. 2). In a similar vein, Nicola et al. (2020) published six lessons learned from evidence-based recommendations to mitigate the impact of the global pandemic. The authors stress the need to

prepare for the pandemic, establish and maintain open communications with the public, take decisive actions early, test and trace those exhibiting symptoms, lead by example, and to include all members of the community. Both Kaul et al. (2020) and Nicola et al. (2020) emphasize the human dimension of leadership rather than simply focusing on tasks necessary to mitigate or resolve the crisis. Additionally, Keen et al. (2020) leverages previous lessons learned from the 2010 earthquake in Haiti to guide initial actions during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. These initial actions included achieving situational awareness, executing adaptive decision making, communicating, conducting energy management, and learning.

Ansell et al. (2020) further described the COVID-19 pandemic as a *turbulent problem* indicated by "the surprising emergence of inconsistent, unpredictable, and uncertain events" (p. 949). The authors suggested that simply being able to withstand a *turbulent problem* will not be enough. In the future, organizations must establish networks and build relations between both the public and private sectors in order to adapt to emerging threats. Public leaders will need to establish new ways to deal with these *turbulent problems* which includes using a collective leadership style, learning to solve problems with incomplete data, being able to influence others without authority, and improving communication skills.

Complexity Theory

Complexity theory is the study of systems that examines how order can emerge from the relationships between the various parts (Holland, 2014). Although there is no universally accepted definition for complexity, complex systems display several similar characteristics. For example, complex systems consist of a network of interacting parts (agents) that respond to feedback. A complex system is adaptive to input and is therefore influenced by its environment.

Complex systems can also display both ordered and disordered behaviors and will appear to evolve and display emergent phenomena (Johnson, 2007).

Following World War II and the rapid advances in science and technology, Weaver (1948) published the seminal work, *Science and Complexity*, which highlighted the need to examine complexity more closely. Weaver (1948) broadly classified scientific problems into three categories: problems with few variables (the reductionist approach that was popular prior to the 1900s), problems with a moderate number of variables termed "organized complexity" (p.69), and problems with numerous variables described as "disorganized complexity" (p. 67). Weaver (1948) noted although a disorganized complex problem might have too many individual parts to know each behavior, "the system as a whole possesses certain orderly and analyzable average properties" (p. 68) which lends itself to probability analysis. Weaver's (1948) challenge was with organized complex problems which contained too many variables and interrelationships to be reduced to a simple formula. Weaver (1948) advocated for the use of "electronic computing devices" (p. 541) and collaboration between diverse teams of scientist to solve these organized complex problems.

Simon's (1962) work, *The Architecture of Complexity*, expanded Weaver's (1948) study of complexity by introducing the concept of hierarchy and non-linear behaviors. Simon (1962) offered that complex systems portrayed a hierarchic nature "composed of interrelated sub-systems, each of the latter being, in turn, hierarchic in structure until we reach some lowest level of elementary systems" (p. 140). Stated more simply, "the whole is more than the sum of the parts" (p. 140).

As the study of complexity continued, it split into two fields—complex physical systems and complex adaptive systems. Complex physical systems typically adhere to established

physical laws; however, that is not always the case. The study of weather patterns and fluid dynamics are examples of two exceptions. Due to the sensitivity of variables in the system, minute changes in initial conditions can result in drastic outcomes giving the appearance of complete randomness (Holland, 2014). In the famous sandpile experiment, Bak et al. (1988) produced a conical pile of sand on a table by slowly adding grains of sand. Initially, the changes to the pile of sand appeared inconsequential. Midway through the experiment, additional grains of sand produced small, but localized changes. However, towards the end of the experiment when the sandpile appeared to have reached equilibrium, an additional single grain of sand could produce an avalanche. Bak and Paczuski (1995) noted, "a small change in the configuration might cause what would otherwise be an insignificant event to become a catastrophe" (p. 6691). Bak et al. (1988) described this phenomenon as self-organized critical behavior.

The other field of complexity studies is complex adaptive systems, pioneered by Holland (1992). For over two decades Holland continued to refine his concept of complex adaptive systems and how computer-based simulations might contribute to the understanding of complexity. Holland (2006) noted that complex adaptive systems "have a large number of components, often called agents, that interact and adapt or learn" (p. 1). Holland (2006) also identified four characteristics common to complex adaptive systems: parallelism, conditional action, modularity, and adaptation and evolution. Parallelism denotes the simultaneous interaction of agents. Conditional action indicates an agent's behavior is dependent upon the signal received. Holland (2006) describes this behavior as an if/then structure. Modularity describes how agents respond to groups of rules and these responses become subroutines. He notes these subroutines can "become building blocks that can be combined to handle novel

situations" (p. 2). Lastly, adaptation and evolution indicate the dynamic nature of agents and how they will change over time. (Holland, 2006).

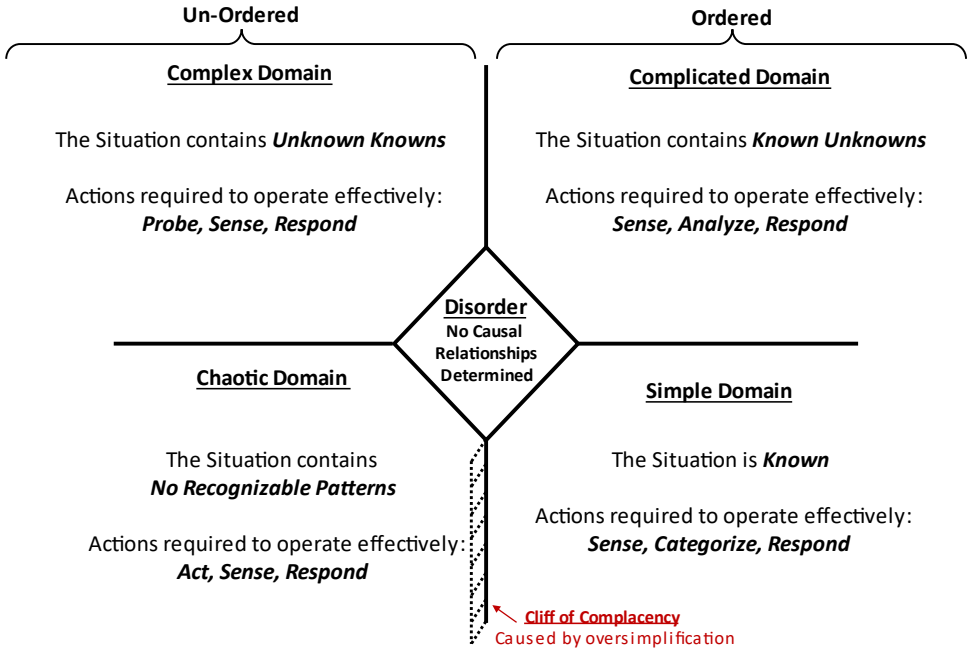
The application of complex adaptive systems is not limited to the scientific field. Eidelson (1997) continued the study of complex adaptive systems by considering how the characteristics of complex adaptive systems could also apply to the behavioral and social sciences. Similarly, Anderson (1999) made relations between complexity theory and organizational science noting "complex organizations exhibit surprising, non-linear behavior" (p. 216). Anderson (1999) further noted "complex systems change inputs to outputs in a nonlinear way because their components interact with one another via a web of feedback loops" (p. 217).

Cynefin Framework

The Cynefin Framework, developed by Kurtz and Snowden (2003), is a sense-making device to help understand complexity. Snowden and Boone (2007) further refine the device and explain the framework's name, Cynefin, is a Welsh term "that signifies the multiple factors in our environment and our experience that influences us in ways we can never understand" (p. 2). The Cynefin Framework (Figure 1) has five environmental domains. The domains are based on identifiable causal relationships listed as "simple, complicated, complex, chaotic, and disorder" (p. 7).

Figure 1

The Cynefin Framework



Note. The Cynefin Framework drawn from Kurtz and Snowden, 2003, p. 468 and Brougham, 2015, p. 6.

By understanding the particular nature and causal relationships evident in each domain, executives cannot only make better decisions but also understand how to avoid making further mistakes. This is further explained by focusing the reader's attention to the lower right portion of the framework and moving counterclockwise. For example, in the *simple* domain, the situation is known, and the actions required are straight forward—sense, categorize, and respond. In the *complicated* domain, the situation is more challenging and requires sensing and analysis before responding. The *complex* domain deals with "unknown unknowns" (p. 9) and the actions required are probing, sensing, and responding. The *chaotic* domain offers no recognizable patterns and requires action and sensing before responding. The fifth domain is *disorder* where no causal relationships can be determined. Kurz and Snowden (2003) note this disorder is often

generated when there is a difference of opinion between those involved in decision making. Although civic leaders may be looking at the same situation, the varying perspectives generate conflicting recommendations. In this domain, Kurz and Snowden (2003) recommend forming some sort of consensus to allow the organization to move forward. One last aspect of the framework worth noting is the *cliff of complacency*. The cliff is located between the *simple* and the *chaotic* domains and is caused by an oversimplification of the problem. For example, previous successes can cause a cognitive bias that lures decisionmakers into a sense of over-confidence. When this over-confidence occurs, and the conditions change, the organization falls off the cliff from the simple into the chaotic domain.

As previously discussed, Johnson (2007) notes complex systems can display both ordered and disordered behaviors and consist of a network of parts that respond to feedback. This response to feedback is a manifestation of an existing causal relationship—which is the essence of understanding the Cynefin framework. If a causal relationship can be identified, then the system can be affected. However, causal relationships may not be initially obvious depending on the various domains. For example, it is helpful to note the two domains on the right side of the framework (consisting of the *complicated* and *simple* domains) represent *ordered* realms—that is causality, or a cause-and-effect relationship, is readily apparent or can be determined rather quickly. Said another way, a certain action will result in a known effect. Likewise, by observing a known effect, the cause can be determined. However, the left side of the framework (consisting of the *complex* and *chaotic* domains) represent *un-ordered* realms where causality is not readily apparent. As Brougham (2015) observes, in the *complex* domain causality is only identified in hindsight. Consequently, solutions are not immediately apparent, but will emerge over time. In the *chaotic* domain, the system does not appear stable (due to the hypersensitivity of the causal

relationships), yet action must be taken quickly and waiting for a solution to emerge is not a suitable option. Hence, in the chaotic domain a decision maker must *act-sense-respond* in order to prevent conditions from worsening.

Turino and Santoso (2020) note that movement between domains is also possible. Organizations typically seek stability and therefore move in a clockwise manner toward the simple domain. However, conditions and situations often change thus forcing the organization to move in a counterclockwise manner. Turino and Santoso (2020) describe this as an "oscillation movement between domains" (p. 160).

Several authors (Gray, 2017; Lane et al., 2021; Schalkwyk et al., 2017; van Beurden et al., 2013) note the applicability of the Cynefin framework to the healthcare industry. For example, Lane et al. (2021) propose a variation of the Cynefin Framework for healthcare workers experiencing urgent decision-making during times of crisis. Specifically, the authors recommend an "act-probe-sense-respond" (p. 454) approach during life-threatening situations. This application of the Cynefin Framework is a merger of the actions in the complex and chaotic domains. Since healthcare workers may be in a crisis mode, they must act first to stabilize the patient. From there the healthcare workers can probe-sense-respond to determine causal relationships so the health problem can be resolved. Schalkwyk et al. (2017) also commend the simple and direct wording used in the Cynefin Framework which greatly enhances the ability to communicate effectively, thus leading to more timely decision-making. Van Beurden et al. (2011) also espouse the value of the Cynefin Framework when addressing complex health issues. Noting the usefulness of the framework as a sense-making tool, van Beurden et al. (2011) are critical of those taking a reductionist approach to complex issues. Reductionists attempt to subdivide a system into its individual parts to understand the whole system. Although this

approach may be helpful to identify some information and might work if causal relationships are well established, the reductionist approach can result in an over-simplification of problems and is susceptible to a *one-size-fits-all* solution. Van Beurden et al. (2011) assert the reductionist approach is less effective for complex issues affecting large populations such as "social determinants of health and climate change" (p.81).

Other authors (Childs & McLeod, 2013; and French, 2013) identify business applications of the Cynefin Framework. For example, Childs and McLeod (2013) endorse the Cynefin framework for efforts dealing with electronic records management; whereas French (2013) identifies business and management applications for Cynefin by noting the framework "offers a further perspective on the relationship between scenario thinking and decision analysis in supporting decision makers" (p. 547).

Rubin and de Vries (2020) also cite the Cynefin Framework in their study of the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic in Denmark. What is remarkable is the identification of co-existing sense-making boundaries between the political leaders and the health experts. The two groups operated in different domains, simultaneously, thus sometimes making opposite demands. The authors further identified that the two "sensemaking frames clashed both publicly and internally, exposing a lack of understanding and communication across different sensemaking frames" (p. 277). Ironically, both groups were correct in their assessment, but unaware that the other group's perspective was formed in a different domain. Hence, the two groups appeared disjointed and talking past each other.

Summary

Chapter 2 provides a summary of the literature that informed this study of crisis leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the search of multiple data bases produced

little, the inquiry identified a clear gap in the literature. The study illustrates the focus crisis leaders place on improving an organization for the future compared to a crisis manager who is more concerned with returning to a pre-crisis status quo. The chapter also highlights the competencies required during a crisis and considers various crisis frameworks. While each future crisis will be unique, this study highlights relevant topics for consideration by crisis leaders.

Chapter 3 - Methods

The purpose of this study was to explore the leadership experiences of a small city government (population of around 35,000) in the Midwestern United States. Specifically, this qualitative study used the narrative inquiry methodology to examine the crisis leadership experiences of the civic leaders responsible for recommending and making decisions to prevent, contain, and decrease the spread of COVID-19 in the city during the pandemic. In this chapter, the research subjectivity is discussed in detail and the research questions are reviewed. A brief explanation of qualitative research is considered along with a review of narrative inquiry and why it was suitable for this study. The research site, population, and protection of human subjects are discussed along with a pilot study that influenced this research. The chapter concludes with a detailed review of the data collection, management, and analysis techniques that were used for the study.

Research Subjectivity

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) identify the role of a researcher being an important distinction regarding qualitative research noting that "the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis" (p. 16). Corbin and Strauss (2015) also recognize that a qualitative researcher is "as much a part of the research process as the participants and the data they provide" (p. 4). This involvement by the researcher differs from quantitative research efforts where researchers go to great lengths to avoid influencing the research process. This contrast highlights a friction point between the two research approaches—quantitative researchers assume a more objective perspective whereas qualitative researchers take a more subjective perspective. While Charmaz (2014) offers that "subjectivity is inseparable from social existence" (p. 14); Merriam and Tisdell (2016) caution "the human instrument has shortcomings and biases can

have an impact on the study" (p. 16). Consequently, it is imperative the researcher is aware of shortcomings and biases and follows protocols designed to mitigate preexisting cognitive frameworks that may distort or misinterpret research findings. This section addresses the researcher's background and interest in the research topic and briefly discusses measures used to counter misinterpretation of the data.

The intent of this research was to explore the experiences of selected civic leaders who may assist further academic research surrounding crisis leadership. The researcher's goal was to find a leadership related topic that was somewhat enduring. Crises, though not frequent, are not uncommon. It therefore seemed reasonable that crisis leadership was a suitable topic for study. Leadership during crisis was also a topic of interest for the researcher given his first career was as an Army officer for 27 years which included four combat tours. Upon reflection, it was the combat experiences that closely related to crisis events given that most combat decisions are made during a crisis or life-threatening event. Consequently, crisis leadership was an appealing topic since it transcends time and can contribute to the field of leadership studies.

Additionally, the researcher's last active-duty assignment in the Army was as a Garrison Commander of a military installation in the Midwestern United States. The Garrison Commander's job was literally the equivalent of being both a mayor and city manager. The researcher was charged with providing service, support, and quality of life to the Soldiers, families, and employees who work on the military installation. Accordingly, the researcher's personal experience as the Garrison Commander made him well suited to examine the leadership experiences of a small municipal government in the Midwestern United States. Given this experience, the researcher was considered a cultural insider who understood the values, beliefs, language, and rituals of the group members—those responsible for managing a city (Schein &

Schein, 2017). However, one possible limitation of a cultural insider is making assumptions. The researcher might mistakenly assume that others perceive things the same way since the researcher had recent group history and experience. To mitigate this, it was imperative that a cultural outsider, with appropriate academic credentials who is not affiliated with city management activities, reviewed the research design, data collection plan, analysis, and presentation of findings. Additional means to ensure quality research are addressed in the following section.

Membership Role

Qualitative researchers deMarrais and Lapan (2004) note, "qualitative interviews rely on developing rapport with participants and discussing, in detail, aspects of the particular phenomenon being studied" (p. 53). Consequently, it was essential for the researcher to develop a relationship with the civic leaders to enable effective and open communication. As stated earlier, the researcher was a former working acquaintance of those interviewed. As such, this previously established relationship made the researcher a cultural insider who was familiar with the beliefs, values, and assumptions of the organization. This insider dynamic was helpful for establishing rapport with the civic leaders and greatly enabled data collection. The insider dynamic was a positive attribute for analysis of the data collected since the researcher understood the meaning of the information conveyed. However, the insider dynamic was also a possible vulnerability regarding data representation since the researcher might wrongfully assume the data presentation was commonly understood by members from outside the organization. Having a third party, from outside the participant organization of study, review the final data presentation was useful. As Creswell (2007) identifies, "having other researchers review our procedures" (p. 45) is an effective validation technique.

Research Questions

Through narrative inquiry, this study explored the crisis leadership experiences of government officials in a small city in the Midwestern United States. The primary research question guiding this study was: What themes emerged from this study of crisis leadership during the COVID crisis from March 11, 2020, to March 31, 2021?

The three research sub-questions were:

1. How did the civic leaders describe their crisis leadership experiences regarding decision making efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. How did the civic leaders describe their crisis leadership experiences regarding communication efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic?
3. What ways did the civic leaders develop a sense of understanding from their interactions with state officials, fellow civic leaders, and citizens of the municipality during the pandemic?

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is a form of research that collects and interprets data where the researcher is part of the research process. Qualitative research seeks to gain a more holistic understanding of social phenomena and often examines a humanistic aspect such as the experiences of participants (Corbin and Strauss, 2015). Merriam and Tisdale (2016) note "qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meeting they attribute to their experiences" (p. 6). Leedy and Ormrod (2005) expand on this noting the purpose of qualitative research is to describe and explain, to explore and interpret, and to build theory. This differs from the purpose of quantitative research which is to explain, predict, confirm, validate, or test a theory. Qualitative research seeks a more encompassing approach with flexible guidelines and can be subjective.

Qualitative research considers context and personal views, and thus acknowledges that analysis may be biased. Qualitative researchers also search for themes and categories in the data and convey the findings in words and narratives, vice numbers or statistics often cited in quantitative analysis.

Corbin and Strauss (2015) identify five of the most frequent reasons researchers choose a qualitative method for research: to examine phenomena using a holistic approach, to explore participant experiences in a phenomenon, to examine how meanings are formed, to study phenomena not comprehensively researched, and to find relevant variables that can be studied in the future using quantitative research. While this study is linked either directly or tangentially to all five reasons listed, there were three reasons in particular that were examined. The study explored the crisis leadership experiences of civic leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic phenomenon, considered how the civic leaders made meaning of the situation, and examined a phenomenon (the COVID-19 pandemic) that was not yet thoroughly researched.

Methodological Framework: Narrative Inquiry

This research used narrative inquiry for its methodological framework. As discussed earlier, two pioneers in the use of narrative inquiry, Clandinin and Connelly (2000), define narrative inquiry as a "way of understanding experience" (p. 20) with the researcher's focus on the narrative. Kim (2016) explores the definition of narrative by examining its etymology noting "the word narrative is from Latin *narrat-* ("related," "told,") *narrare* ("to tell"), or late Latin *narrativus* ("telling a story"), all of which are akin to Latin *gnarus* ("knowing"), derived from the ancient Sanskrit *gna* ("to know")" (p. 6). She further explains a narrative therefore involves both telling and knowing and uses a myth as an ancient example. Although the words narrative and story are sometimes used synonymously, Kim (2016) clarifies the difference between a

narrative and a story in that "a story is a detailed organization of narratives arranged in a (story) structure based on time although the events are not necessarily in chronological order" (p. 8). Czarniawska (2004) adds that "narration is a common mode of communication. People tell stories to entertain, to teach and to learn, to ask for an interpretation and to give one" (p. 10). Consequently, Wang and Geale (2015), explain how narrative researchers leverage this human desire to tell stories. They note

> Narrative researchers look for ways to understand and then present real-life experiences through the stories of the research participants. The narrative approach allows for a rich description of these experiences and an exploration of the meanings that the participants derive from their experiences (p. 195).

The Narrative Inquiry Process

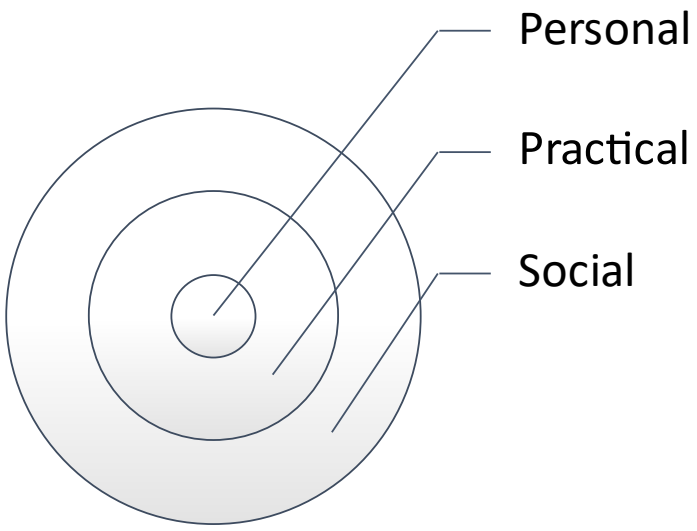
Creswell (2007), who leverages Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) work, broadly describes the narrative inquiry process consisting of five steps—although he insists the process is not a "lock-step approach" (p. 55). The first step is to determine if narrative inquiry is an appropriate method noting "narrative research is best for capturing the detailed stories or life experiences of a single life or the lives of small numbers of individuals" (p. 55). The second step is to spend time with the participants and collect information from the participants in the form of open-ended interviews. This information, collected from the participant's stories, are what Clandinin and Connelly (2000) call "field texts" (p. 129). These *field texts* may consist of the researcher's notes, letters, memos, emails, or official correspondence from the participants. Lindsay and Schwind (2016) note "often the narrative inquirer will return to participants with stories, *interim text*, constructed from interviews, transcripts, and field notes so that the story can be affirmed, challenged, or extended" (p. 15). Step three is for the researcher to identify the *context* of the

stories. Establishing the context includes placing the collected stories within the appropriate experience, culture, time, and place. The fourth step consists of analyzing the stories and placing them in a logical framework. As previously mentioned, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) describe the three-dimensional space of a narrative consisting of participants, time, and place. They add to this dimension by allowing inquiries to travel "inwards, outwards, forwards, backwards, and situated within place" (p. 49). Lindsay and Schwind (2016) describe these perspectives giving a "personal-social quality" (p. 15) to narrative inquiry and use the metaphor of an *inquiry puzzle* to describe the research process noting "when we engage in an inquiry puzzle with our participants, we become co-participants in this endeavor" (p. 15). This description of the researcher and the narrator being co-participants reinforces Corbin and Strauss's (2015) notion of the qualitative researcher being in integral part of the research process. This concept of the researcher and participant being co-participants leads to the final step of collaboration which includes involving both with the research. Creswell (2007) notes "in narrative research, a key theme has been the turn toward the relationship between the researcher and the researched" (p. 57). From this perspective, the participants play an essential role in the clarification and validation of the researcher's analysis.

Lindsay and Schwind (2016) describe an additional level of analysis suggesting "in order for participant's stories, field text, and interim text, to be transformed to *research text*, the interim text needs to be examined using the three levels of justification" (p. 15). This references what Clandinin and Connelly (2000) call the *personal*, *practical*, and *social levels* of justification (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 122) (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Three levels of justification



Note. Drawn from Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 122.

Lindsay and Schwind (2016) describe these three levels as concentric circles with the personal level being in the center, the practical level being the next ring, and the outermost ring being the social level. They further correlate these rings with levels of analysis. The first level is achieved by "reading and re-reading participants' stories, listening to the audio recordings, and reviewing the field notes, while we reflect on personal life experiences, thoughts, feelings, tensions, observations, and insights related to the narrative interview" (p. 16). The second level of analysis is reached by identifying "emerging narrative threads within and across the stories, which upon further reflection become visible as narrative patterns" (p. 16). During the final level of analysis, the researcher considers "the significance of the participants' stories within the greater social

context, we explore how the gained insight about the investigated phenomenon contributes to the expansion of inter-professional and inter-disciplinary knowledge" (p. 16).

The narrative inquiry methodology was well suited for this study for several reasons. First, the approach aligned with the purpose of the research—to explore the crisis leadership experiences of select civic leaders in a small Midwestern city during the pandemic. Second, the study sought to understand how the participant leaders made meaning during the pandemic experience. Third, since the COVID-19 pandemic was a novel experience, this unique opportunity was worthy of exploration. This third reason correlates with Creswell's (2007) statement that "we conduct qualitative research because a problem or issue needs to be explored" (p. 39). He further describes the suitability of the narrative inquiry methodology by commenting that "narrative research is best for capturing the detailed stories or life experiences of a single life or the lives of a small number of individuals" (p. 55). Consequently, this research limited its study to five civic leaders who played a key role in dealing with the COVID-19 crisis. Additionally, an inductive approach to research was logical since existing theories might not be suitable or prove inadequate to explain the leaders' experiences. A pilot study conducted in the fall of 2021, which is discussed later, informed this this conclusion. Therefore, a qualitative study that used an open-ended approach enabled the crisis leadership experiences of the participants to be examined in greater detail. Lastly, this study used the interview process as one of the primary methods to obtain data. As such, the researcher was integrally involved in the construction and interpretation of the data, which aligned with the constructivist approach.

Research Site

The research was conducted online, via Zoom, for four of the five civic leaders based on the participant's scheduling availability. One participant preferred being interviewed in the

privacy of his home. All research was conducted in the private office spaces of the participants and the researcher to afford maximum confidentiality.

Population

The subject population was from the Midwestern United States, specifically from a small city (population around 35,000). According to the National Center for Education Statistics, which uses urban and rural definitions established by the United States Census Bureau, a small city is defined as a "territory inside an Urbanized Area and inside a Principal City with a population less than 100,000" (Geverdt, 2019, p.1). A convenience sample was used for the sampling technique. The source of the subject population was civic leaders responsible for recommending and making decisions to prevent, contain, and decrease the spread of COVID-19 in a small Midwestern city. This study selected civic leaders who were involved in emergency management decision-making and communication efforts.

As discussed in Chapter 1, the council-manager form of governance is the most popular form of governance in the United States. Therefore, it was not surprising that the form of governance exercised by the convenience sample was the council-manager form. This form of governance enabled the researcher to interview the city manager, who was responsible for the daily administrative duties of the community, as well as the mayor and a city council member who were responsible for establishing policy. The chief of police and county health official were also interviewed.

Inclusion criteria was civic leaders, mentioned above, from city government who helped inform and make these decisions. Exclusion criteria was anyone who did not meet the listed inclusion criteria. Subjects were recruited through associates. Once the subjects signed the

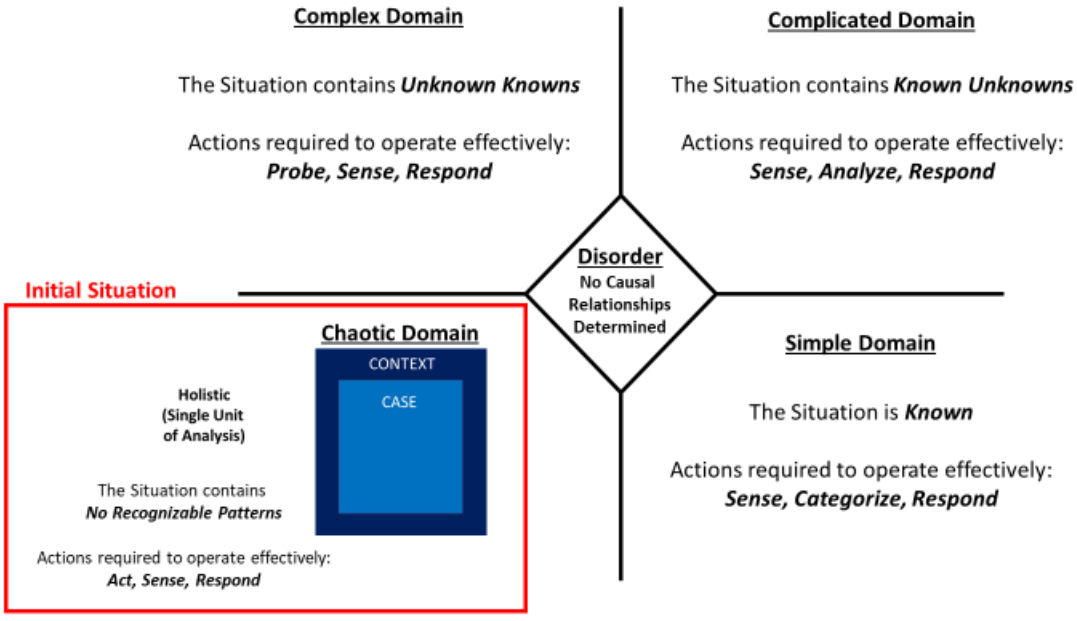
informed consent forms, they were be enrolled in the study. Phone calls and email reminders were used for follow-up recruitment procedures.

Pilot Study

This research was informed by a pilot study conducted by the researcher in the fall of 2021. The pilot study explored the experiences of a church leadership team charged with a similar task of safeguarding a congregation during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, the pilot study examined the experiences of a senior pastor and the congregational president who were responsible for recommending and making decisions to prevent the spread of COVID-19 on the among the congregation. The pilot study used a combination of Yin's (2018) single-case study superimposed on Kurtz and Snowden's (2003) Cynefin Framework (Figure 3).

Figure 3

Pilot case study in relation to the Cynefin Framework



Note. The Cynefin Framework drawn from Kurtz and Snowden, 2003, p. 468 and the Single-Case Study drawn from Yin, 2018, p. 48.

The findings from the previous pilot study helped inform this research and identified that the narrative inquiry approach was a better suited methodology to explore the crisis leadership experiences of the participants. Consequently, a new set of interview questions, aligned with the narrative inquiry methodology, were developed and piloted prior to collection of data.

Protection of Human Subjects

Pertinent ethical considerations were followed during the execution of this study. For example, since the research involved the participation of human subjects, the study was submitted to Kansas State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and confidentiality was maintained. An informed consent form (Appendix B) was used prior to the start of any research and pseudonyms were assigned to all participants. Data was kept in a locked office on a password protected computer. The data was password protected and only the researcher had access. Data will be destroyed after three years by deleting all relevant files and physically destroying any storage discs (CDs).

Data Collection

The researcher employed a narrative inquiry approach to the study which consisted of semi-structured personal interviews, and a review of documents and records. The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions to document personal narration. Official documents and records were examined by the researcher to enhance multiple sources of evidence for analysis.

Interviews

As previously mentioned, interviews provide a rich data source and can range from formal semi-structured interviews to natural conversations (Bhattacharya, 2017). The researcher

typically remains bounded to prepared interview questions utilizing the former interview style, whereas the latter interview style affords an equal exchange of information between the researcher and the individual. This study used semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions to document personal narration (Appendix A). To assure information was captured to address the research questions, an alignment table was created (Appendix A). A minimum of two interviews, lasting 60 to 90 minutes each, were conducted for each participant. Four of the interviews were conducted online, via Zoom, for the civic leaders unable to appear in person due to scheduling conflicts. One interview was conducted in person, at a private location, based on the participant's request. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed by the researcher. The transcripts of the interviews were provided to civic leaders to ensure accuracy. This afforded the civic leaders an opportunity to modify any interpretation of what was said and clarify the intention of their statements.

Document Review

Documentation also brings several advantages to research; data can be reviewed repeatedly, can contain specific names and details of an event, and can cover extended periods of time or many settings (Yin, 2018). Documents and records for this study included the city website, the county health map depicting the spread of COVID-19, newspaper columns, health flyers, notes, email correspondence, written reports, and media articles dated from March 11, 2020, through March 31, 2021. The documents were reviewed for evidence of leadership decisions and communication efforts and corroborated the reasons participants took certain actions or expressed concerns. An example is House Bill 2285 (2023) which was a legislative effort to constrain the authority of state and county health officials. A more detailed discussion of the documents reviewed is provided later in this chapter in the Data Representation section.

Analytic Memos and Researcher Reflections

Stressing the importance of organizing one's thoughts, Stake (1995) notes that, "good research is not about good methods as much as it is about good thinking" (p. 19). Therefore, to enable better thinking, this study used a combination of analytic memos, reflections, and mind maps to collect and process the data following each interview. Charmaz (2014) adds, "memo-writing provides a space to become actively engaged in your materials, to develop your ideas, to fine-tune your subsequent data-gathering, and to engage in critical reflexivity" (p. 162). Saldana (2021) elaborates further noting that analytic memos allow researchers to "dump their brain" (p. 58) and capture critical thoughts that may help identify "emergent patterns, categories, themes, concepts, assertions, and propositions" (p. 69). After reflecting on the data collected, the researcher visually depicted the various codes and concepts using a mind map to further organize thoughts and identify themes or concepts emerging from the data.

Data Management

The *NVivo 12* (2018) software was used to assist with the analysis of this research. *NVivo 12* is a form of Qualitative Data Analysis Software (QDAS) that was specifically developed to help manage, query, and visualize data as well as assist with reporting (Jackson & Bazeley, 2019).

The semi-structured personal interviews with open-ended questions were used to document personal narration (Appendix A). Interviews were conducted in private, digitally recorded and transcribed by the researcher. Information with participant names followed the same use of confidentiality/pseudonyms as the interview process. Data was uploaded into *NVivo 12* for analysis.

Data Analysis

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) note that qualitative research focuses on meaning making and understanding. The authors note, "qualitative researchers are interested in how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 15). This study specifically explored the experiences of a small city government to safeguard the population of approximately 35,000 people in the Midwestern United States during the COVID-19 pandemic.

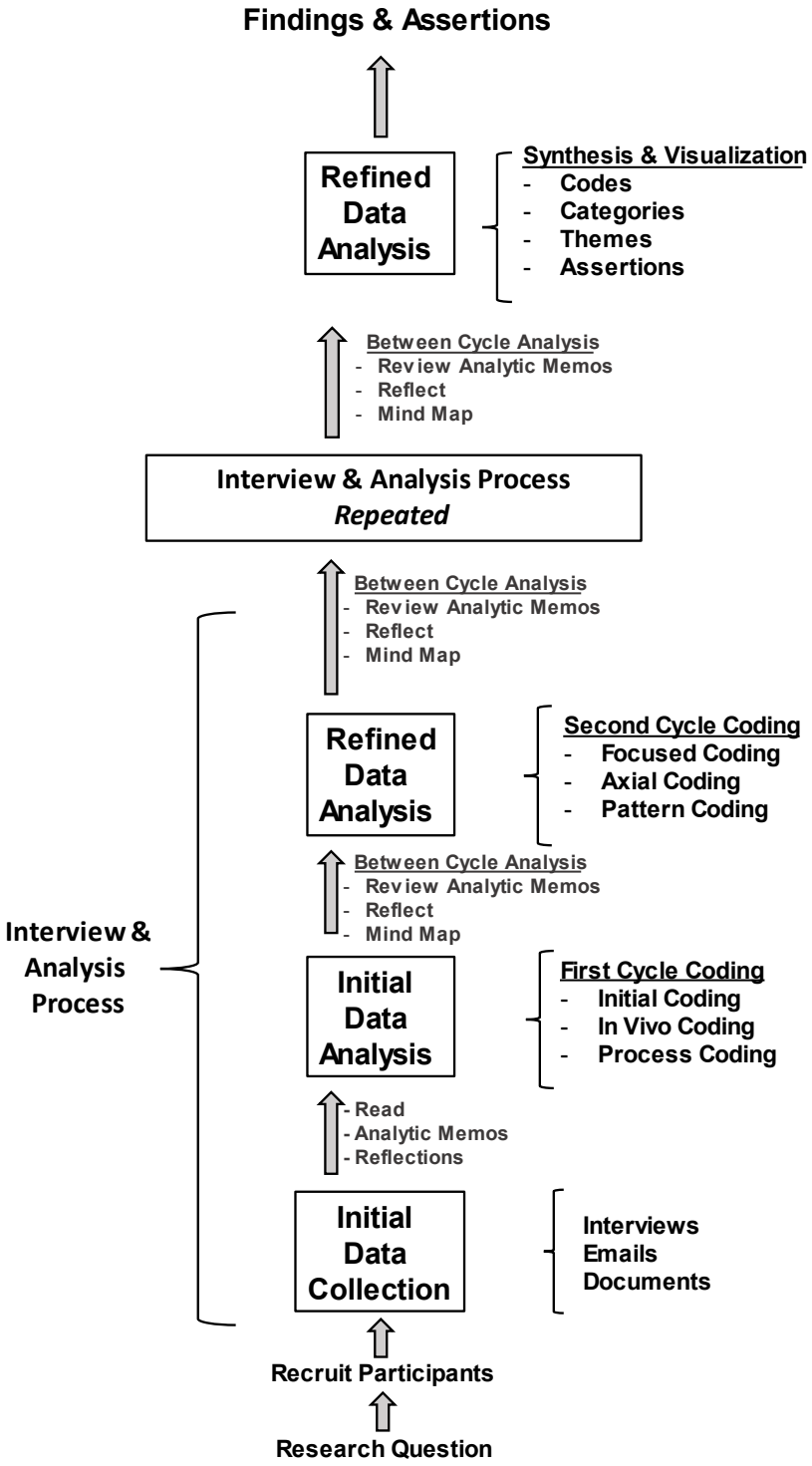
Leedy and Ormrod (2005) expand the idea of meaning making by noting qualitative researchers often focus on a particular phenomenon and examine that phenomenon in its complexity. Consequently, qualitative research often involves collecting and analyzing large volumes of data. Data management techniques are employed to assist with this analysis. Bhattacharya (2017) explains that "data analysis involves creating processes that would allow for deep insights that reflect how the researcher integrated theoretical and analytical frameworks, previous understanding of literature, and the focus of research purpose and questions" (p. 150). The author notes raw data is further grouped into units called *codes*; similar codes are grouped into additional *categories*; and from the categories, *themes* can emerge. *Assertions* or *theories* can arise from various themes. These assertions provide an interpretation of the coded data. Saldana (2021) also notes this code-to-theory cycle is very similar to the way human brains process information from *codes* and identifying *patterns*, to *categories* and eventually to *themes*.

Creswell (2007) offers a similar data analysis spiral that consists of four upward spiraling loops resulting in an "account or narrative" (p. 150). The activities that occur during each loop are data managing; reading and memoing; describing, classifying, and interpreting; and

representing and visualizing. This study used a combination of Creswell's (2007) and Saldana's (2021) coding methods to analyze the acquired data (Figure 4).

Figure 4

Data analysis sequence



Note. Data analysis sequence is drawn from Creswell, 2007, p. 151, and Saldana, 2021, p. 18.

Data collection and analysis flowed sequentially. In-person interviews were conducted after initial contact was made and the civic leaders agreed to participate. The interviews were performed in a private location and digitally recorded by the researcher. Transcripts of the interviews were provided to the civic leaders to ensure accuracy and serve as a validation check. The researcher then coded the transcripts using the first cycle coding techniques of initial coding, in vivo coding, and process coding. Between cycle analysis included reviewing analytic memos, reflecting on the emerging data, and developing mind maps. The researcher then coded the transcripts using the second cycle coding techniques of focused, axial, and pattern coding. This was followed by between cycle analysis as mentioned earlier. The second round of interviews repeated this process. Once all information was collected, coded, and analyzed, the researcher synthesized the material, identified any themes and concepts that emerged from the data and visually depicted any findings and assertions. The final analysis and write up was peer reviewed to assist with the validity and quality of the research.

The *data collection and analysis plan* is color coded to delineate the various stages (Table 1). Blue indicates establishing initial contact and gaining consent with the participants. Light red indicates actions performed during the first interview. Gold indicates actions performed during the second interview. Green indicates synthesis, development of findings and assertions, final analysis, and peer review.

Table 1

Data collection and analysis plan

Establish contact and gain consent with participants
Conduct first round of interviews
Transcribe and verify accuracy of transcription with participants
Conduct First Cycle Coding (Initial, In Vivo, and Process Coding)
Conduct Between Cycle Analysis (Analytic Memos, Reflection, Mind Mapping)
Conduct Second Cycle Coding (Focused, Axial, and Pattern Coding)
Conduct Between Cycle Analysis (Analytic Memos, Reflection, Mind Mapping)
Conduct second round of interviews
Transcribe and verify accuracy of transcription with participants
Conduct First Cycle Coding (Initial, In Vivo, and Process Coding)
Conduct Between Cycle Analysis (Analytic Memos, Reflection, Mind Mapping)
Conduct Second Cycle Coding (Focused, Axial, and Pattern Coding)
Conduct Between Cycle Analysis (Analytic Memos, Reflection, Mind Mapping)
Conduct Synthesis and Visualization (codes, categories, themes, and assertions)
Develop Findings and Assertions
Final analysis and write up (Analytic Storyline)
Peer Review

Coding

The coding for this research consisted of three elements which are discussed in detail. The three elements were first cycle coding, between cycle data analysis and organizational processes, and second cycle coding.

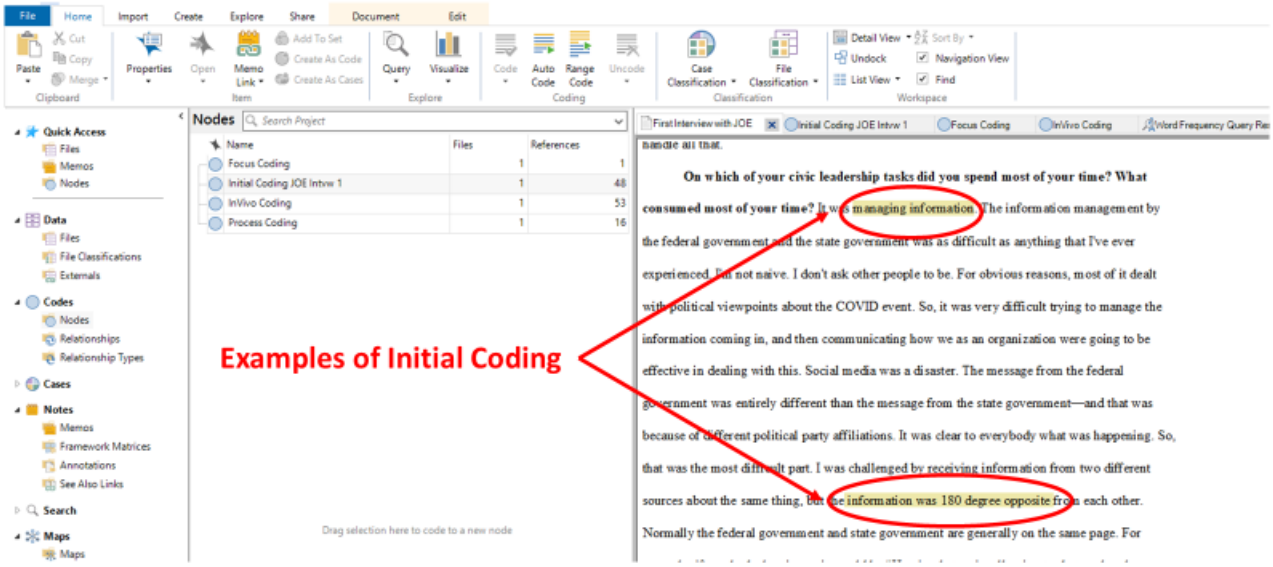
First Cycle Coding. During the initial phase of coding, researchers focus primarily on the data examining what is happening, rather than studying the participants. During initial, or first cycle coding, the researcher remains open to analytical opportunities that might emerge. The three coding methods used in the initial cycle were: initial coding, in vivo coding, and process coding.

Initial coding was the researcher's first review of the data and was used to subdivide data into distinct parts checking for differences and similarities that might exist. Based on the findings

from *initial coding*, other analytical leads may emerge for further examination. During *Initial Coding (Figure 5)*, it was imperative that the researcher remain open to categories that might appear from the data rather than searching for a pre-established pattern or framework to confirm an idea or concept. Saldana (2021) identifies that *initial coding* has also been referred to as open coding or free coding and can also incorporate *in vivo* and *process* methods for coding.

Figure 5

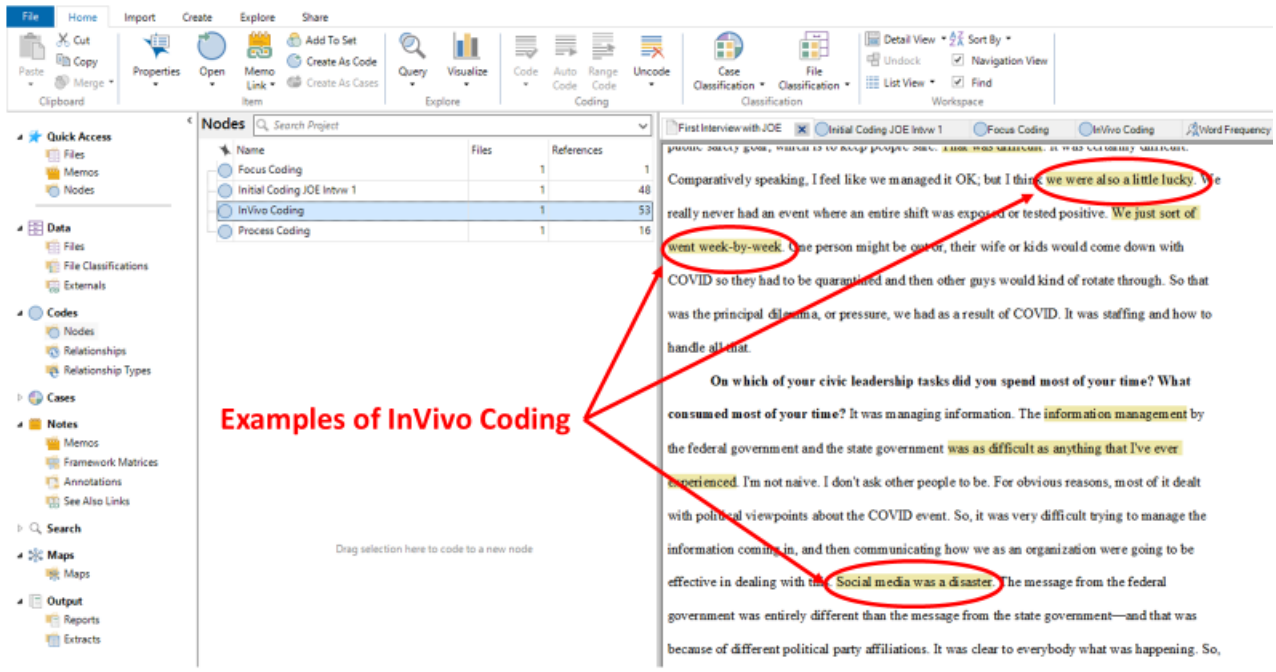
Initial coding



Since qualitative research is interested in how people interpret their experiences, *in vivo* coding was used during initial first cycle coding efforts to capture the voice of the participants. Saldana (2021) notes *in vivo coding* (Figure 6) has been labeled "literal coding" (p. 137) since this approach uses the words spoken by the participants to generate the actual codes. He further identifies that *in vivo coding* is particularly well suited for "studies that prioritize and honor the participant's voice" (p. 138).

Figure 6

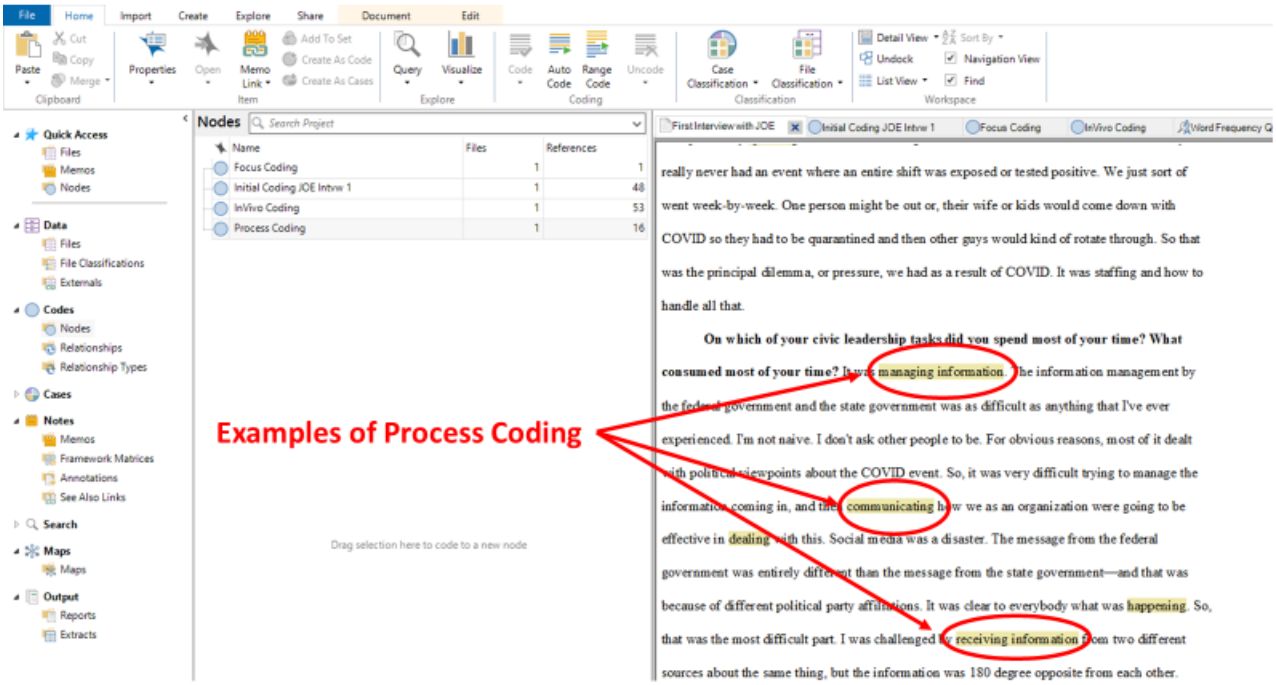
In vivo coding



Process coding is also known as action coding and focuses on gerunds (words ending in "-ing") identified during the data collection process. Saldana (2021) comments that process coding (Figure 7) is particularly helpful when examining "routines and rituals of human life" (p. 144). He adds process coding should not be used as the sole method for coding, but rather incorporated with other approaches.

Figure 7

Process coding



Between Cycle Data Analysis and Organizational Processes. Saldana (2021) describes first cycle coding as analysis and considers second cycle coding a form of synthesis. To bridge the transition from analysis to synthesis, the researcher reviewed analytic memos, reflected on the emerging data, and developed mind maps. Saldana (2021) adds, "good thinking through analytic memo writing, coupled and concurrent with processes of coding and categorizing, can lead toward higher-level themes, concepts, assertions, propositions, and theory" (p. 299).

Second Cycle Coding. Saldana (2021) notes second cycle coding is conducted in the later stages of data analysis whereby researchers "constantly compare, reorganize, or 'focus' the codes into categories, prioritize them to develop 'axis' categories around which others revolve, and synthesize them to formulate a central or core category that becomes the foundation for explication" (p. 302). The three methods used during second cycle coding were focused, axial, and pattern coding.

Focused coding examines data for similarities and is also referred to as selective or intermediate coding. During focused coding, the researcher examined the data for frequent or prominent codes that can be developed into emerging categories. Saldana (2021) notes the "goal of this method is to develop categories without distracted attention at this time to their properties and dimensions" (p. 304).

Axial coding continues the coding process from the first cycle initial coding by examining the data for possible relationships. Charmaz (2014) notes "axial coding relates categories to subcategories; specifies the properties and dimensions of a category and reassembles the data you have fractured during initial coding to give coherence to the emerging analysis" (p. 147). Boeije (2020) also identifies four elements of causation that may emerge from the data during axial coding. The elements are context, conditions, interactions, and consequences. Context refers to the boundaries in which the action occurs. Conditions are events that occur during the context. Interactions describe the specific exchanges that occur between the participants. The consequences are the "outcomes or results of the contexts, conditions, and interactions" (p. 113). It is also important to note, one of the goals during axial coding was for the researcher to achieve saturation which occurs when no new information emerges from the data.

The last method discussed during second cycle coding is pattern coding which searches for a meta-code that emerges from the data. Saldana (2021) notes "pattern codes are explanatory or inferential codes that identify a theme, configuration, or explanation" (p. 322). Pattern codes are useful for: consolidating large amounts of data into smaller, more condensed categories and themes; identifying "causes and explanations in the data" (p. 322); and exploring community relationships and networks. See below for summary of axial and pattern coding (Table 2).

Table 2

Summary of axial and pattern coding

Coding Results					
	Participant				
Category	City Manager (Glenn)	Mayor (Don)	City Councilman (Tim)	Chief of Police (Joe)	County Health Official (Vince)
Relationships	X	X		X	
Communications	X	X	X	X	X
Policies	X				
Other Business	X	X			
Politicization of Pandemic	X	X	X	X	X
Information	X		X	X	X
Management					
Interpreting	X				
Manage Perceptions	X				
Decision Making	X				X
Staffing				X	
Core Values				X	
Self Reliance				X	
Adaptation				X	X
Learning				X	X
Work Load					X
Yellow Fill indicates themes					
Red Lettering informs assertions					

This study used the coding methods described above while conducting research. Initial, in vivo, and process coding were used during the first cycle phase of coding; and focused, axial, and pattern coding were used during the second cycle phase. Together, these coding efforts helped examine the crisis leadership experiences of the select civic leaders during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Data Representation

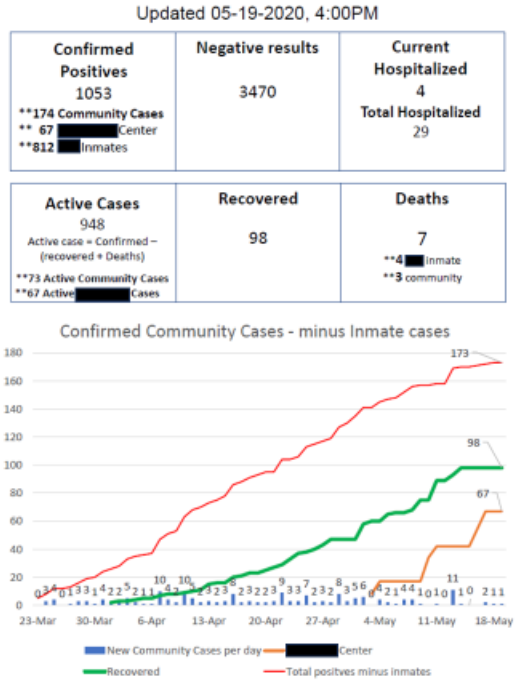
This research used the narrative inquiry approach to examine the crisis leadership experiences of five civic leaders using semi-structured, personal interviews with open-ended questions to document personal narration. The research also considered documents as part of the data collection and analysis process. Information with participant, city, or county names followed the same use of confidentiality/pseudonyms as the interview process. The data in this study was presented using mind maps, figures, tables, and narrative text.

Several different types of documents, including digital websites, were considered for this study. For example, the city web page listed community news, monthly calendar events and recordings of the city commission meetings. The link connecting to the city commission meetings posted video recordings of the meetings, the meeting agenda, and minutes. While the meeting minutes were documented the title of the topics discussed, they did not provide near the detail offered by the interview participants. There were 42 city commission meetings held during the period examined by the study.

Another source of information was the county map update (Figure 8). This map listed the number of confirmed positive COVID cases, the number of negative results, the number of people currently hospitalized, the number of active cases, the number of patients who had recovered, and the number of deaths. The county map also posted a graph depicting the number of cases over time that tracked a tally by day as well as a trendline over the months which indicated an increase or decrease in cases.

Figure 8

County map update

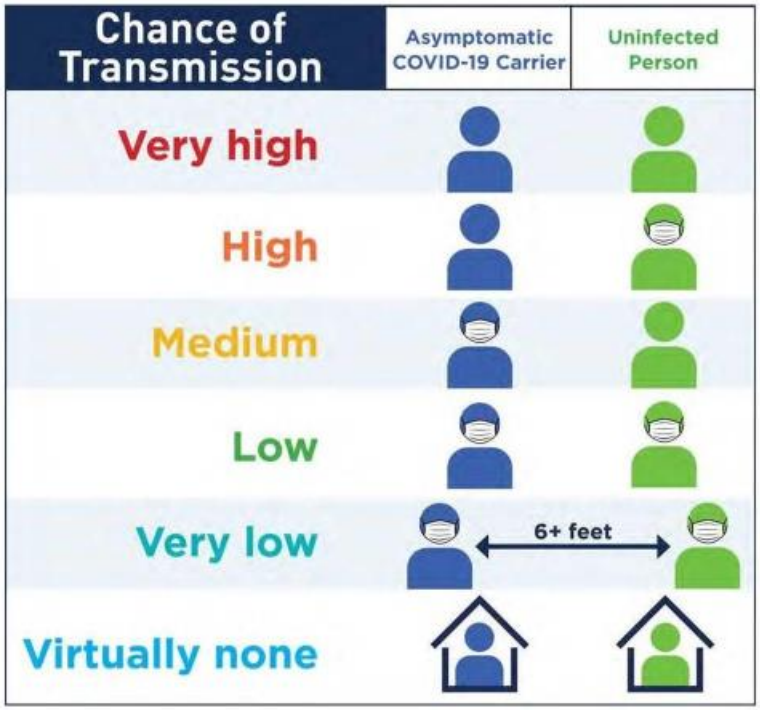


Note. County health department (2020, May 19). *Community map* [Facebook Screenshot]. Retrieved from https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=2678516722409777&set=a.1459176427677152

Local newspaper columns, a health flyer, and state legislation (House Bill 2285, 2023) were also considered in the data collection and analysis process. The local newspaper was an initial source of information, especially regarding the information provided by the city mayor who explained the reasons for certain decisions made, such as the closing of food and drink establishments. A medical flyer showing the chance of transmission, or effectiveness of wearing masks to decrease the spread of COVID, was also a helpful corroborating document (Figure 9).

Figure 9

Chance of COVID transmission health flyer



Note. University health system (2023, February 27). *Chance of transmission* [Facebook Screenshot]. Retrieved from https://www.facebook.com/kuhospital/photos/a.10150374112643104/10158534009663104/?type=3

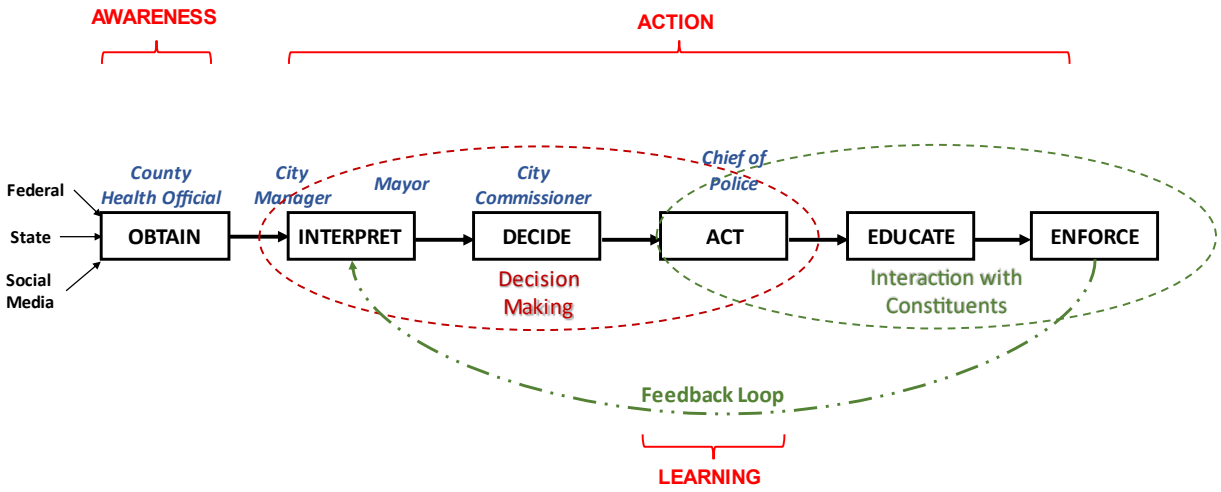
Most interesting was the state legislation, House Bill 2285 (2023), which was put forth to limit the authority of state and county health officials. The concern over this legislation is discussed further in Chapter 4.

Research also reviewed eleven personal emails from the city mayor and city commissioner. The emails messages provided clarification on points raised during the interview and conveyed the tone, or atmosphere, of some of the city commission meetings. All total, the documents reviewed confirmed the actions taken by the civic leaders, and in the case of the state legislation, confirmed the concern expressed by the county health official.

Data was also represented using a mind map. Mento et al. (1999) note that mind mapping (Figure 10) is a way of "capturing ideas and insights horizontally on a sheet of paper" (p.1). It is a technique of assisting with inductive analysis. Mento et al. (1999) add mind mapping is a graphic way of portraying information that can illustrate relationships between topics and allow the researcher to consider the subject in a holistic manner. Similarly, Jackson and Bazeley (2019) identify that mind maps can be used to explore "a main idea and visualize a hierarchy or web of topics associated with that idea" (p. 23).

Figure 10

Example of mind map



Note: Information derived from author's personal notes.

Trustworthiness

Oktay (2012) notes trustworthiness is "a term in qualitative research to parallel the term 'validity' in quantitative research" (p. 153). Trustworthiness encompasses those efforts taken by the qualitative researcher to ensure quality research is performed. For example, Creswell (2007)

offers eight strategies often used in qualitative research to achieve quality. These strategies include: (1) extended engagement and observation in the field, which could last from months to years, (2) triangulation which uses multiple data sources to identify themes, (3) obtaining feedback from peers in the field to validate a researcher's interpretation, (4) conducting negative case analysis that challenges existing hypotheses and refines theories until all cases are accounted for, (5) expounding on any bias the researcher may have, (6) verifying findings and conclusions with the participants, (7) providing "thick description," (p. 209) that is sufficiently detailed for readers to draw their own conclusions from the information, and (8) obtaining "external audits" (p. 209). The strategies reflect extensive efforts researchers may take to ensure a rigorous process is followed to establish validity while collecting and analyzing the data.

Likewise, Tracy (2010) introduces eight criteria that address the issue of ensuring quality research with qualitative studies. These criteria include "a worthy topic, rich rigor, sincerity, credibility, resonance, significant contribution, ethics, and meaningful coherence" (p. 837). While these eight criteria are helpful, this study focused on those criteria aligned described by Charmaz (2014).

Charmaz (2014) offers four criteria for evaluating qualitative studies. Using the metaphor of a journey to describe the qualitative research process, she notes the researcher may have been an integral part of the process. Acknowledging that different disciplines may require different standards for the conduct of research and acceptability of evidence, Charmaz (2014) offers the following criteria: "credibility," "originality," "resonance," and "usefulness" (p. 337). Credibility includes the researcher establishing an in-depth familiarity with the topic, obtaining sufficient data to establish the researcher's claims, "systematic comparisons between observations and categories," and whether there are sufficiently strong logical linkages between the data collected

and the claims established (p. 337). Originality examines the newness of the insights provided, whether the concepts offer a new perspective on the data, if there is theoretical significance to the data, and whether or not the researcher's assertions "challenge, extend, or refine current ideas, concepts and practices" (p. 337). Resonance involves how the studied experience is portrayed to include mentioning "taken-for-granted meanings," linkages to those studied, and whether the analysis provides greater insights regarding the lives and environment of those examined (p. 338). Finally, usefulness includes the value and application of the analysis conducted. Can people use the information in their daily lives? Does the study provide any "generic processes" with tacit implications? Does the analysis generate ideas for further research, and does it describe its contribution to the body of knowledge?

This research incorporated each of the four criteria (credibility, originality, resonance, and usefulness) mentioned by Charmaz (2014) to ensure quality research. For example, credibility was established through an in-depth study of crisis leadership which was built on the researcher's personal experiences in city management as mentioned in Chapter 1. This ensured familiarity of the subject. The researcher's previous combat experiences and employment in the Department of Command and Leadership at the United States Army's Command and General Staff College provided additional familiarization with the topics of crisis leadership, decision making, and communication. Sufficient data was collected by interviewing at least five municipal leaders, for 60-90 minutes, at a minimum of two interviews each and reviewing pertinent documents. Originality was achieved by examining the recent phenomenon of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on the civic leaders charged with recommending and making decisions to prevent, contain, and decrease the spread of COVID-19 in the city during the pandemic. As mentioned in Chapter 2, data was just starting to emerge from studies on the

pandemic. This study offers new perspectives and refines current ideas on best practices for decision making and communication during a crisis. Resonance was attained by both the research methodology and the coding techniques applied to the data. The researcher did not approach the study with a preconceived theory attempting to confirm or deny a hypothesis. Rather, the researcher adopted an inductive approach and remained open-minded and relied on the findings and assertions to emerge from the analysis. Selecting the *in vivo* coding technique also allowed the voice of the participant to be heard. Both the narrative inquiry methodology and the *in vivo* coding technique helped establish resonance. Finally, usefulness was established through the utility of the findings and recommendations of the study. The research produced five themes and four assertions regarding crisis leadership. This study also provided comparative data points for future crisis leadership studies.

Chapter Summary

Chapter 3 provides an overview of the methodological approach this study adopted to explore the crisis leadership experiences of five civic leaders in a small Midwestern city during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. The narrative inquiry methodology proved well suited to achieve the research goal of exploring the crisis leadership experiences of the civic leaders. The study used an inductive approach to research where the researcher was an integral part of the interview process as data was collected and analyzed. Data collection, analysis, and validation with the participants was repeated and refined, in an iterative manner, until categories emerged, and themes and assertions could be made. Charmaz's (2014) four criteria of credibility, originality, resonance, and usefulness were also followed to ensure quality research was conducted.

Chapter 4 - Findings

Introduction

This chapter reviews the findings from the research conducted. The study examined the crisis leadership experiences of five civic leaders from a small city in the Midwestern United States. The leaders were responsible for recommending and making decisions to prevent, contain, and decrease the spread of COVID-19.

Using a framework consisting of four causation elements (context, conditions, interactions, and consequences), the chapter begins with a description of the *context* and *conditions* in the city before and during the first year of the pandemic. The first year was selected since it includes the discovery of the crisis, the period when critical decisions were made to safeguard the community, and it reveals the consequences of these decisions. A brief description of the participants is also provided along with an explanation for their chosen pseudonym.

The chapter then discusses the five themes that emerged from the data—information management is critical, effective communication is paramount, relationships matter, adapt to survive, and politics trumps science. The themes also provide insights regarding *interactions* between participants. The themes are followed by a discussion of assertions that were made based on the data and coding results. The discussion on the politicization of the pandemic highlights the *consequences* of the experience. A crosswalk of the research questions is also provided. The chapter concludes with a summary of the findings.

Context and Conditions

As previously mentioned, this study occurred in a small city in the Midwestern United States with a council-manager, or commissioner-manager, form of government. In this particular city, the job of city commissioner was only part time, with the city manager being hired to help

run the city on a full-time basis. Prior to the pandemic, the mayor and the city manager met as required for weekly updates and to establish agenda items for the city commissioner's meeting. The elected officials tended to remain apolitical, at the local level, and focused on doing what was best for the constituents. The chief of police and the county health official had a working relationship in existence for over two decades.

Not surprisingly, the pandemic changed things. The city commissioners began meeting more frequently, and the mayor and the city manager talked daily. The city manager spent the first half of his day working COVID-19 related issues before tending to the business of running the city. The mayor made COVID-19 topics his priority and focused on city related issues every other week. The chief of police began receiving conflicting guidance, and the county health official's authorities became challenged. Ultimately, the pandemic became a divisive event for the city and its inhabitants.

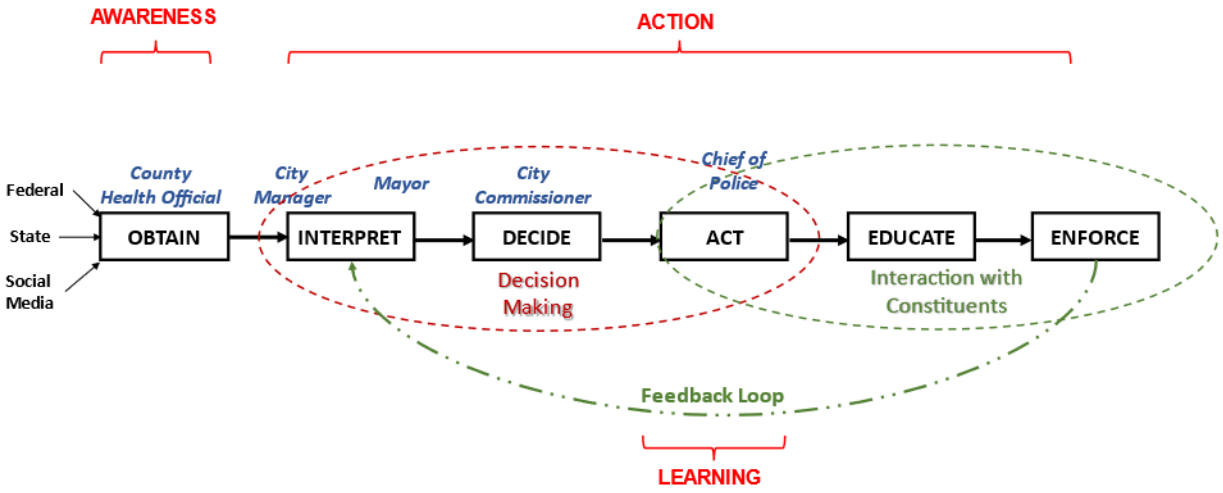
Participants' Overview

This study involved five participants. The first four were the city manager; the mayor, who served during the period examined; a city commissioner; and the chief of police. A fifth participant, the county health official, was added following the recommendation of both the city manager and the mayor. I selected the participants based on their involvement with decision making and communication efforts at the city level. The first four participants all worked within the jurisdiction of the selected city. The health official was outside the city's jurisdiction, but had routine, if not daily, interactions with the city officials.

A brief review of the information flow during the pandemic is helpful in understanding how the city officials worked together (Figure 11).

Figure 11

Information flow



Note: Information derived from author's personal notes.

While the model is a generalization, it depicts the flow of information that moved in a hierarchical progression from federal to state to county to city. This is not to imply that city officials did not seek information from multiple sources. Rather, it reflects how the city officials respected the authorities at each level. At a macro-level, the city achieved awareness via feeds from the federal government, state, and county. The county then established a Joint Information Center (JIC) which became a centralizing hub for data collection and a valuable resource for the latest information. The city's action phases involved interpreting, deciding, and acting on the information obtained. The action part of the process initially involved educating constituents about health risks and mitigation measures. Action eventually shifted from education to enforcement. The learning phase occurred with the feedback loop from the constituents to the city officials regarding the effectiveness of their decisions and the willingness, or not, to comply.

Due to his role and responsibility to maintain the public health and welfare for the county, the county health official helped the city obtain the necessary data to inform decision makers. His primary point of contact was the city manager and the mayor. The city manager made a concerted effort to keep the mayor and the city commissioners informed so they could decide and vote on issues to help prevent, contain, or decrease the spread of COVID-19. The chief of police played a vital role in converting city policies into action. He helped enforce the decisions voted on by the mayor and city commissioners. A conscientious effort was also made to first educate the citizens about COVID-19 related decisions, such as masking and social distancing, before actions were taken to enforce those decisions.

The setting is Ciudad de Las Aguilas (City of the Eagles) or Las Aguilas in the vernacular. The leaders interviewed were Glenn, Don, Tim, Joe and Vince. Like the band the Eagles, there were parallels between the band member's personality and those of the civic leaders. Las Aguilas had co-leaders, there were two front men, each member had a distinct personality, and a few members played an outside, but important role.

The late Glenn Frey, sang vocals, played guitar, and was one of the co-lead singers and front men for the band. The city manager, whose assigned pseudonym was Glenn, served a key role in helping guide the city through the pandemic. His main focus was maintaining the day-to-day operations of the city.

The other co-leader and front man for Las Aguilas was similar to Don Henley who also plays drums. The mayor, whose given pseudonym was Don, helped make key decisions, and together with Glenn, kept the band or city moving forward. Similarly, the mayor maintained a strategic vision for the city's future. Like Frey and Henley, the city manager and mayor became the two key players at the city level.

In the band, Timothy B. Schmidt plays bass and has the responsibility of providing a harmonic and rhythmic foundation for the band. The city commissioner's role matched Tim's since he provided a steady hand that helped keep the city commissioners focused and on beat. Hence, he assumed that pseudonym.

Joe Walsh is another guitarist for the Eagles with impressive talent and an energetic persona. Similarly, the chief of police was also talented and full of energy. Consequently, he fit the pseudonym of Joe.

A more recent addition to the Eagles is the grammy award-winning musician Vince Gill. Although a recent arrival, Vince plays an important role. Likewise, the county health official, who was technically outside the city's jurisdiction, also played an important role. He kept the key decision makers informed, thus allowing the city to function properly during the pandemic. Therefore, his pseudonym aligned with Vince.

Using the band analogy, Las Aguilas leaders are able to sing in harmony. Combining their talents and individual skills, they were able to work together and guide the city through the pandemic to the best of their abilities. Table 3 lists the participants and their relevant information.

Table 3

Participant's information

Participant	Position	Pseudonym	Years of Experience	Role
First Participant	City Manager	Glenn	15	Co-lead, responsible for day-to-day functions
Second Participant	Mayor	Don	13+	Co-lead, looked long range at city interests
Third Participant	City Councilman	Tim	21	Enabled harmony among the city commissioners
Fourth Participant	Chief of Police	Joe	32	Great talent, full of energy
Fifth Participant	County Health Official	Vince	25	An accepted outsider proving vitally important

Themes

As a result of the coding process mentioned in Chapter 3, five themes emerged from the data: information management is critical, effective communication is paramount, relationships matter, adapt to survive, and politics trumps science. The information and communication themes were intertwined during the crisis. Information influenced decisions and decisions were communicated to those responding to and those affected by the crisis. Relationships and adaptation also played a vital role in responding to the crisis. Lastly, the politicization of the

COVID-19 pandemic was a social phenomenon that had a deleterious effect on the population from a health perspective. Each theme is discussed in detail.

Information Management Is Critical

All participants commented on the importance of information management during the pandemic. Vince, the health official, made it a personal endeavor to provide the most accurate data possible to the decision makers in the cities. The elected officials, Don and Tim, along with the city manager, Glenn, invested considerable time interpreting the data and passing along important information to the constituents. Joe, the chief of police, used information to help inform and educate the citizens before directing efforts to enforce decisions.

Early on, Vince realized the decision makers were counting on him to provide accurate information. Consequently, he made a personal effort to get things right. He commented, “we were trying to keep everybody as up to date as we could, especially those who needed to make decisions early on.” He noted,

> One of the big things that I really prided myself on was the accuracy of the data. When we put out that there were five cases, we knew those five cases; or we knew those 10 cases; or we knew whatever was coming out. For our cases, they weren't just a number in the system that the state dumped on us. And until we could make that link, I wasn't going to put it out to the constituents.

Information also proved a source of frustration for Vince. He described how quickly source data would change and possibly negate the accuracy of his previously provided information. The potentially contradictory nature of the information in this complex and dynamic environment threatened his veracity. He recalled,

> The big challenge was receiving information at a 9:00 a.m. meeting or at a seminar or webinar, you would start formulating that message and by the time you're ready to put it out at 3:00 p.m. or 4:00 p.m., it would change. The information would change. Or you would just put it out, and the news would come on at 5:00 p.m. with something different. And then you looked like you had no idea what you were doing. So, it was the struggle of trying to save face or the reputation of the public health agency's jurisdiction.

Glenn, the city manager, noted the importance of receiving accurate information from the county, Vince's organization, and passed laudatory comments regarding the value of the Joint Information Center (JIC). Glenn noted, "I cannot overstate how heavily we relied on the County Health Department. Early on they set up a JIC. They were consistent and thorough with passing along information." The county established the JIC as a centralized information hub that received data from the state and then relayed it to the cities. This direct line to the state proved extremely helpful in providing the cities with needed information.

Information also played an important role in decision making. Don stated the biggest challenge he faced regarding making decisions was the rapidly changing situation.

> I think just keeping abreast of the very rapidly unfolding situation was the biggest challenge. Trying to figure out what was most important, what was most impactful on the lives of the citizens proved challenging. We were trying to ascertain the information, without getting wrapped up in all the details, of what was most important and what needed to be communicated.

In a similar tone, the city commissioner, Tim, commented on the challenge of being inundated with large amounts of information. "We were disseminating a lot of information. It felt like we were being fed with a firehose." It was difficult to maintain situational understanding.

Tim lamented, “so much information was being pushed out there and some of it was slanted.” (Slanted information is data that was skewed to support a particular political position. The issue of slanted information is addressed under the theme of politicizing the pandemic.)

Joe, the chief of police, also stated he spent a large amount of his time managing information. “It was managing information. Information management by the federal government and the state government was as difficult as anything that I’ve ever experienced.” Joe later discussed the efforts the police made to inform the public about the mask mandate when it went into effect in November of 2020. Joe told his troopers,

> For the first couple of weeks, we're going to be in an educational mode. We’d ask people, “Hey, did you know that they changed the rules? You're required to have a mask.” And at that point, people were starting to ramp up. But at some point, we were going to end the educational mode and switch to the enforcement part, because that's what we do.

Effective Communication Is Paramount

The next theme, which naturally flows with information, is the importance of effective communication. All participants commented on the significance and vital role communications played during the crisis. The participant responses ranged from the frequency and most effective means of communication to the greatest challenges.

When the pandemic first hit, the frequency of communication between the various participants was daily. Tim noted that daily communication became the normal way of doing business in the city. He recalled,

> As you know, a city commissioner in our city is a part time job. The full-time administrator is the city manager—a professional city manager. But during the COVID crisis, especially early on, there were daily updates, daily conversations, and daily

> briefings from the city manager to all the city commissioners. He would explain what was happening, steps that he was taking with the city staff, and briefings he was receiving from the state officials and the county health officials. Our county health director, Vince, provided a lot of information to the city manager who would funnel it down to us.

Likewise, Vince noted "It seemed there were almost daily conversations, whether they were phone calls, emails, or something." He added the demand for accurate information resulted in him working non-stop for the first year. Vince bemoaned,

> I worked seven days a week, 12 to 16 hours a day, never a day off. And that's really because the amount of work that we were doing included webinars, phone calls, quarantines, testing, trying to get a handle on things, dealing with municipalities, school boards, angered constituents, and putting out press releases. The data that needed to be put out on a daily basis was extensive.

Don commented on the value of communications, citing communication being "the lifeblood" of an organization. He also stressed the need to communicate horizontally across his organization by "making sure that my fellow commissioners knew what was going on." When discussing the most effective way to communicate with constituents, Don replied,

> I think the town halls, the Facebook Live town halls, were my most effective way to communicate. The town halls were held once every two weeks with commission business meetings and study sessions held each week on an alternating basis.

Glenn commented on the town hall meetings noting,

> I have to give credit to our mayor at the time, Don. We held weekly Facebook town hall meetings, and they ended up being very popular. We would stream them live, but we also

> recorded them so people could access them later in the day, and we were getting hundreds of views and impressions from those. So, we relied on social media.

The city's use of social media as a means of communication highlights its value by enabling near real-time communication to a wider audience. Tim, the city commissioner, also added, "Don started a weekly briefing, and it was very effective the first three or four times."

The responses to the greatest communication challenges varied from how frequently the information changed and how politics were affecting messaging to the limitations of social media. For example, Glenn noted, "the biggest challenge was to keep people updated with the most current health order, from either the governor's office or the county, and explaining that to them and what that meant for day-to-day life in the city." In a similar tone, Don commented,

> Initially, it was keeping up with what was coming down from the state and the county, with respect to orders regarding businesses that had to close, but that didn't last for a long time. It wasn't very helpful that people were playing partisan politics within our community, within the state, and at the federal level on all this. Believe me, they were playing partisan politics.

Joe's comments mirrored this when he expressed,

> We all knew that politics were guiding most of the key people and their messages that they were communicating. You know, if you turn on this channel, they're going to say this; if you turn on that channel, they are going to say that. We tried as hard as we could, but ultimately failed, at not letting that affect us in terms of our 'on the ground' decision making—keeping people safe and determining how to still do our jobs.

Tim's comments captured the limitations of having to meet via social media. For the first few months of the pandemic, only the mayor and city manager would meet in person for the city

commission meetings. The other city commissioners would connect via Zoom. While this was a safe way to conduct the city's business, it had its limitations. In Tim's opinion, meeting via Zoom proved difficult.

> I would say having our meetings via Zoom for a good three or four months was a challenge because you didn't have that face-to-face interaction with the other commissioners. There was not that crowd that used to be in attendance. There used to be discussion, back-and-forth with other commissioners, and citizens would participate and ask questions or present issues. You had the press there. Information tended to get pushed out to the community much faster. It's just tougher to do on Zoom. So, I think that was the toughest challenge.

Relationships Matter

The importance of relationships was another theme revealed by the data. Relationships are critical to success when responding to a crisis. While all participants commented on the value of relationships in some form, not everyone spoke of this directly. The remarks provided by the mayor, the city manager, and chief of police are most revealing.

Don commented on the close working relationship he had with the city manager, Glenn. Don credited his years of service working on a school board with the superintendent for helping him understand the importance of this connection. He remembered,

> From my experience of being the school board president for USD (Unified School District) 999 for many years and working with the superintendent, I kind of realized how that relationship would/should work. While not responsible for the day-to-day workings of the city government, I had to have a close working relationship with the city manager, while being careful not to take up too much of his time. I believe our relationship became

> even closer than in normal years because things were changing so quickly and, in many cases, dramatically when that crisis first began. I wanted to make sure we "were on the same sheet of music," at least on the most pressing matters facing the commission and the city.

Don also mentioned the relationship he had with a state university that enabled him to gain information needed to explain how local businesses could receive financial aid. He stated,

> I also had some relationships with a state university small business development organization that had a lot of knowledge regarding the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP). I had to get knowledgeable about that and figure out how specific I needed to be. I wanted to get information out to the small business leaders who were listening in on the Facebook Live meetings. What did they need to do to apply for that PPP? The loans were so important. I just played a relatively small role, but I felt good about it.

Don referenced how the county development corporation was very helpful answering specific questions and clarifying matters for the banking community and the financial service sector. He credits the positive connection he had with the director as proving useful. Don recalled, "I had a good relationship with the executive director for the County Development Corporation. So, that helped."

When I asked Glenn, the city manager, what he learned from the pandemic experience, he emphasized the value of relationships. He noted,

> Reflecting back, I gained a further appreciation for networking and building relationships and how that pays off at a time of crisis. Training and repetition are important but being able to talk to peers and colleagues about the situation, beyond just what was written in health orders, I think made our organization's responses stronger. Putting in that time (to

develop relationships) really paid off, I think. Having the feel for the community, the players, the people, and in my profession the network—that networking and relationship building—is key.

Joe, the chief of police, discussed similar points regarding the value of relationships and how they enabled successful operations. For example, he stated,

> Within our county, and especially within a small town like ours, the difference is we all know each other. For example, I know Vince (the county health director). He and I go back 25 years. So, I had his cell phone number, he had mine. We talked a lot. He would say, "Hey, Joe, we're setting up vaccines at the Community Center." I would respond by asking, "What do you need from me?" His answer was "I need cops to make sure the crowd doesn't get out of control." And I'd say "Got it. Tell me what your schedule is, and we'll work it out."

He further elaborated how relationships also enabled communications. Joe mentioned,

> Everybody talks about community policing being pie-in-the-sky, but at the local level it comes down to relationships. At the local level, our communications were very effective. I know Vince; Vince knows me; Glenn (city manager) knows Vince. We would talk five or ten times a day, or however many times we need. We talked at night, we talked early in the morning, texted messages, you know, emails, all that stuff.

Adapt to Survive

Another theme that emerged was the need to adapt. This was particularly apparent in the comments from Joe and Vince. Their remarks reveal an effort to figure things out where previous solutions may not exist but yet something still has to be done.

Vince described the context under which adaptation became essential. He recalled this realization occurring around the time the Delta variant of COVID-19 came out in the fall of 2020. He remembered,

> It was just a struggle. You were learning something day-to-day on something you had no knowledge about. I mean, it was a virus that none of us were familiar with. If we were talking about tuberculosis, we could talk all day. We have lots of data. We have lots of information. We know how to treat it. We have treatments. But we were dealing with something we didn't even know how to treat.

He expressed exasperation noting, “We had no idea. Not to say we were making it up as we go along, but we were basically making it up as we went along based on what we knew about it at that moment in time.” He further explained how he made sense out of what was happening,

> I don't know how we did, truthfully. Not to say we were flying by the seat of our pants, but it was a pandemic that none of us had ever seen before. It was information none of us had ever dealt with before. The best thing that we could do was just come together as a group and really evaluate the information that was coming into us.

Vince further clarified the need to adapt as the virus mutated noting,

> We changed things up. I mean we just had to adapt on a regular basis. As the information came out, we had to just reevaluate things as the incident command team and just say, “OK. How do we get this information out?” We had to figure out how to deal with things as the virus changed and mutated and everything.

In relation to the city’s leaders efforts to adapt, he replied,

> Again, it was a team effort. We filled the ICS (Incident Command System) with a lot of good people from all areas of the county—from PIO (Public Information Officer), public

> works, the fire department, EMS (Emergency Medical Services), and the hospital. It was all of those entities sitting down and having discussions regarding what they thought was the best way to move forward with the information that we had at that moment.

He even described his leadership style taking more of a collaborative approach, commenting that,

> It was definitely not me making all of the decisions and telling everyone this is what is going to happen with an iron fist. It was more of getting everyone to sit down in the room, getting all of the information on the table, and determining what was in the best interest of the county when it came to making some of these decisions.

Joe, the chief of police, had similar comments regarding the need to adapt to a novel situation. He expressed his frustration noting, “We just never had anybody that we could call on to talk to. We didn’t have anyone we could call and ask, “Hey, when you guys had this situation last time, how did you know what to do?” Consequently, to describe how he made sense of what was going on, since this was a novel problem, he used an analogy of learning to fly while building the aircraft. He quipped,

> So, what’s the old saying? You learn how to fly an airplane while you're building it? That's probably what we did. You have in your head how things are going to go, and then they don't go that way. And so, you sort of learn and you adjust. You kind of get to the right spot, sort of intentionally. In some regards it’s through practice and a little luck. That’s probably about the best way to describe it.

Admirably, Joe conveyed a spirit of perseverance and a willingness to figure things out. The police department took things one day at a time and remained amenable to new ideas. He recalled,

> So, that's just how we sort of did it, day-by-day. Every day we'd regroup and ask, "Where are we today? What's the big challenge today? How are we going to deal with it? When we had that situation a few weeks ago, we did 'x,' and it didn't work. So, let's try something different."

Joe also noted, "You have to have a different mindset." He further expounded on this idea further,

> So, there are probably two things. (1) You are going to have to be really open to confronting an entirely new dynamic. It is a new event that is completely different from what you are used to. (2) You're going to have to work incredibly hard to define those three or four critical components of success. Then, you're going to have to work as hard as you can to stay in that lane.

He also commented on the need for patience and the realization that things were not going to be perfect. Joe reflected, "You have to be as patient as you can, just understanding that it's just going to go off the rails and sideways given this kind of event."

Politics Trumps Science

The final theme that emerged was the politicization of the pandemic. This theme is best summarized by Vince who lamented, "politics trumps science" meaning people were ignoring empirical data regarding how to mitigate the effects of the pandemic for the sake of staying true to a certain political position. This politicization of the pandemic manifested itself in two broad categories confusion and consequences. The confusion occurred regarding which authority had credibility. The consequences were seen in the backlash from constituents and reelection results.

Confusion

Joe's responses reveal the amount of time leaders invested in what he termed "managing information" in order to reduce confusion and determine the proper actions to take. He recalled,

> Social media was a disaster. The message from the federal government was entirely different than the message from the state government—and that was because of different political party affiliations. It was clear to everybody what was happening. So, that was the most difficult part. I was challenged by receiving information from two different sources about the same thing, but the information was 180 degrees opposite from each other.

He added it was hard to know who to listen to noting, "This was such a unique and different event, it was not handled well from a messaging standpoint. Due to the underlying political issues viewpoints, it was really difficult to sort through." When asked about the greatest challenge he felt regarding communications, Joe answered,

> We all knew that politics were guiding most of the key people and their messages that they were communicating. You know, if you turn on this channel, they're going to say this, if you turn on that channel, they are going to say that.

His exasperation resulted from people not looking at matters objectively. He noted, "You know, at some point, it just all devolved into political pockets where people just seemed to follow whatever political viewpoints they had." He added "You set those opinions aside for the safety of the general public and that was an abject failure in this case. We all should be ashamed of ourselves."

Vince, the county health official, expressed similar frustrations from limitations to his authority. Initially, county health officials could enforce orders regarding isolation and

quarantine. However, as time progressed and the pandemic became more politicized, his authorities became more restricted. He recalled, “The problem that entailed afterwards was all of the kickback, if you will, from even the legislative side that started pushing back. They questioned if we could really enforce the orders and if so, how.” The legislation Vince reference was House Bill 2285 (2023) that called for a restriction on,

> the authority of the secretary of health and environment and local health officers to control the spread of infectious or contagious diseases, repealing the authority of the secretary to quarantine individuals and impose penalties for the violations thereof and prohibiting the secretary of health and environment from requiring COVID-19 vaccination for children attending a childcare facility or school.

Of note, in the spring of 2023, the state house passed the bill 63-56, and the state senate passed the bill 22-18. The bill was officially enrolled and presented to the governor on May 5, 2023. The governor subsequently vetoed the bill on May 12, 2023 (Bahl & Alatidd, 2023). However, the interview with Vince was conducted three months prior to this veto. During the interview he added, “I think we’re really pushing the wrong way.” His concerns were not so much over the loss of personal authority, but rather the inability to do what is in the best interest of others. Vince noted, “Somebody has to be able to look out for that and we have to have protections in place or we're going to be in a really bad situation the next time this rolls in.” He added future pandemics may spread more quickly given advances in modern transportation.

Vince expressed the challenges of receiving conflicting information while trying to render an accurate report. He recalled,

> One of the biggest challenges was the information coming from all of the competing sources. They tried to get it out the fastest, but not necessarily the most accurate. Things

were changing and information was conflicting. Then there was the pushback from the community.

He took a consequentialist approach. Vince declared, “I was always trying to do the right thing for the biggest group.” He added, “I had over 81,000 people I had to worry about based on the decisions I was putting out. I have to go to bed at night and look at myself in the mirror every day, and I think I did that.”

Vince commented on how quickly politics influenced decisions. He recalled,

> With the fellow civic leaders, we learned that politics trumps science a lot of times. At the beginning everybody was really looking to public health and their information, and we were kind of on board with that. But we saw it switch quickly. As the information throughout pandemic kept going, it was apparent that a lot of the decisions being made were politically driven versus following the recommendations coming from public health.

Vince commented on how polarizing the issue became,

> What I learned about this pandemic was how large of a divide it created. People jumped on either one side or the other. And there wasn't a whole lot of in-the-middle thought process, it was more politically driven and this, I think, created a lot of animosity.

Consequences

The second category of the politicization of the pandemic is consequences. The term *backlash* appeared several times during the interviews and was first noted by the city manager, Glenn, who recalled, “We faced a backlash from segments of the population and sometimes a very vocal and very passionate backlash. A lot of these decisions fell to the city manager.” With regard to decision making, Glenn relied on the experts to influence his decisions noting, “We made the decisions that were reflected in the science and by the experts.”

Don, the mayor, also commented on the polarizing nature of the pandemic. He replied, “I'm not going to get into this in too much detail but depending on the political party of the state officials, they quickly went to their corners.” He added how contentious things became, declaring “You know, there were some pitted battles, as far as having a difference of opinion, with respect to whether the governor was taking the right actions.” However, he took a benevolent perspective giving the decision makers the benefit of the doubt noting,

> All I'm saying is that there was a lot of uncertainty. People were generally trying to do the right thing at the state, the county, and the city levels. Remember, this crisis came upon our community, the state, the United States, and the world, very suddenly and virulently.

When I asked Don specifically about the impact of the pandemic becoming politicized, he expressed frustration about how partisan things became. He recalled, “It made it harder. Although, maybe I wouldn't say harder, but it was certainly a little more uncomfortable with some constituents, and frankly, some politicians, local politicians, making it as partisan as they did.” Don continued noting how the partisanship continued into the 2020 election cycle. This was expected at the state level, but it was unusual at the city level. He added, “the local race was politicized from a partisan standpoint, and I don't think I benefited from that.” Don was not reelected to the city commission and was consequently replaced as mayor once he completed his term. However, he seemed proud of the effort he gave and how he led the city during a very challenging time. Don offered,

> Do I have any regrets? No. I wouldn't have done anything differently with respect to the decisions I made. It's just the times we live in. It's unfortunate that it is still going on within our community. And, in my humble opinion, it is to the detriment of the well-

being of the community and, in a lot of cases, to the individual citizens. But I don't know. Those are my initial thoughts.

Tim, the city commissioner, discussed the consequences of the pandemic becoming politicized. He recalled the resistance to some of the decisions made. He noted,

> I think the biggest challenge was knowing the pushback that you were going to get. Anytime you're involved as an elected official, by the way, I spent 13 years on the school board, and 13 years on the city commission, there would be pushback on any controversial issue. When that happens, you are hoping you're with 55% of people, because 55% people will say "Great call!" And 45% of the people will say, "Horrible call!"

Tim further added that he made his decisions on masking and social distancing based on what he felt was right. He clarified, "So, I don't want to say it was the toughest decision—it was the right decision. I had no problem. I knew there would be a lot of pushback and something close to character assassination associated with that decision." Tim summarized his decision making by stating, "Sometimes you get to that point in life where you are not checking political winds. It was the right thing to do, and we did it." He later added, "This international, world event, caused more polarization in the United States than any other event that I can think of since the Vietnam War."

Tim then offered a vignette about a city meeting regarding a mask mandate. At the time, the number of positive COVID-19 cases were rapidly increasing, and the vaccines had not yet been released. He recalled there were a couple of hundred people outside city hall. The city commissioners voted in favor of imposing masks along with enforcing social distancing. Tim mentioned that the police had escorts for all the commissioners, following the vote, since the

people outside city hall were very upset. He declined the police escort and walked to his car. Along the way, one particular man yelled at him declaring "You're evil! You're evil!" Tim added, "they were just screaming at me." He reflected and thought, in hindsight, declining the police escort was a little foolish because of the "mob mentality" he was experiencing. He noted, "People were pounding on my car as I was leaving. That was probably our most contentious vote during the 13 years I spent on the city commission."

Regarding the ultimate consequences of the first year of the pandemic, Tim recounted how his efforts and decisions cost him the subsequent election, but he has no regrets. He explained,

> Looking back, I would not change my vote. I would not change anything I did. I'm proud of what we did. I think we did the right thing, even though there are people who say that I didn't. And I know it cost me an election. But I've spent 21 years in elected office; I think I've done my civic duty.

Assertions

This study makes four assertions: adaptation is an important behavior in the complex environment of a crisis, social media can be an effective means to communicate to a wide audience in a timely manner, the politicization of an issue can complicate the situation, and relationships are of critical importance during a crisis. All are important aspects for leaders to consider when preparing for future crisis situations.

Value of Adaptation

The first assertion is the value of adaptation in a complex environment. This was reflected in the discussions between Joe and Vince. Each gathered their teams to determine what was working, what was not working, and solicited ideas for what to try next. Joe remembered,

> Every day we'd regroup and ask, "Where are we today? What's the big challenge today? How are we going to deal with it? When we had that situation a few weeks ago, we did 'x', and it didn't work. So, let's try something different.

In the case of the county health officials, they were constantly adapting in an effort to stay up with the mutating strains of the virus. Vince recalled the value of "getting everyone to sit down in the room, getting all the information on the table, and determining what was in the best interest of the county when it came to making some of these decisions." His leadership style clearly adapted to a more collaborative approach.

Social Media

The next assertion is that social media proved an effective tool in helping convey timely information to a wide audience. Early on, the mayor and city manager realized the effectiveness of leveraging social media to not only conduct routine city council meetings via Zoom, but also to host town hall meetings via Facebook Live. Using Zoom for meetings allowed the council members to remain in an isolated status, enabled social distancing, and permitted the mayor and city manager to still communicate and function as a city government. Likewise, Facebook Live allowed the mayor to safely transmit his message to his constituents without violating social distancing restrictions. These Facebook Live sessions could also be recorded to be watched at a later date and also monitored to determine the number of viewers. While there are many sources of social media, Zoom and Facebook Live were specifically mentioned by the participants. In this case, social media was a means for communicating to an intended audience in a timely manner.

Politicization

The third assertion is the adverse effect of politicizing an issue. As previously discussed, politicizing an issue can result in confusion and potentially negative consequences. The city manager identified most of his time was spent trying to determine the proper course of action given conflicting information. The result was a delay in compliance with the guidance since subordinates at the city-level were trying to determine whether to follow federal or state guidelines. The chief of police also expressed frustration at receiving opposing guidance due to the political filter through which information was being transmitted. He recalled, "We all knew that politics were guiding most of the key people and their messages they were communicating." The mayor also noted that, "It wasn't very helpful that people were playing partisan politics within our community, within the state, and at the federal level on all of this." Since the pandemic became politicized, health precautions, such as wearing masks and social distancing, also became affiliated with political parties. Consequently, if someone did not agree with the city guidelines, due to their political affiliation, then compliance became a concern.

Ironically, in spite of the mayor and the city manager's best efforts, basing their decisions on science, and doing what they thought was in the best interest of their constituents, neither Don nor Tim were re-elected. As Vince, the county health official, astutely noted, "politics trumps science" when issues become politicized.

Value of Relationships

Finally, the value of existing relationships is clearly apparent from this study. The previous discussion regarding the relationship between the city manager and the mayor highlights how a relationship enables parties to understand how each think and process information which can result in a synchronization of efforts. Don described this as being "on the

same sheet of music." Glenn highlighted the value of previous relationships when commenting on the strength of his network of fellow city managers. These relationships enabled him to compare his ideas with trusted agents and glean insights regarding how they handled problems. The idea of establishing mutual trust was also apparent from the discussions between the chief of police and the county health official. Since Joe and Vince had known each other for more than 25 years, they had a very strong relationship that enabled each to support the other in a rapid manner. This quick response was based on the mutual respect each professional developed for the other over the years. It is important to note that establishing a relationship takes time. Consequently, the time to develop and foster a relationship needs to be invested prior to a crisis, to be of greatest value.

Review of Research Questions

The primary research question guiding this study was, "What themes emerge from this study of crisis leadership during the COVID crisis from March 11, 2020, to March 31, 2021? This study also explored three sub-research questions that helped examine the topic of crisis leadership. The first sub-question sought to learn how the civic leaders described their crisis leadership experiences regarding decision making efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic. The second sub-question sought to discover how the civic leaders described their crisis leadership experiences regarding communication efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic. And the last sub-question sought to learn in what ways the civic leaders develop a sense of understanding from their interactions with state officials, fellow civic leaders, and citizens of the municipality during the pandemic. As previously discussed, five themes emerged from the data: information management is critical, effective communication is paramount, relationships matter, adapt to survive, and politics trumps science. The responses to the research questions enabled four

assertions to be drawn from the data: adaptation is essential to successfully operate in a complex environment, social media is effective for transmitting information quickly to a wide audience, the politicization of a health issue may have adverse effects, and relationships are critical during a crisis event. A crosswalk of each sub-question and how the responses relate to the various themes and assertions is summarized in Table 4.

Table 4

Research question crosswalk

Research Question	Participants				
	City Manager (Glenn)	Mayor (Don)	City Commissioner (Tim)	Chief of Police (Joe)	County Health Official (Vince)
RQ1: Decision Making Efforts	- Relied on team and experts - Challenged by backlash of constituents	- Relied on previous experiences (military & school board) - Close relationship with City Manager - Decisions based on science	- Checked with neighboring cities to compare efforts - Challenged by pushback from constituents	- Adaptive Leadership approach (probe, sense, respond) - Experimented	- Followed guidance from the CDC and State - Challenged by how rapidly information was changing (driven by changing conditions)
RQ2: Communication Efforts	- JIC to receive info - FB Live to transmit - Feedback via emails and phone calls	- City Mngr, Websites for info - FB Live to transmit - Feedback via emails and phone calls	- Receive info from City Mngr, and websites - FB Live for transmit - Fan of F2F interaction - Feedback via emails and phone calls	- Challenged with conflicting guidance from Feds, State, County	- Received info from CDC and State - Met with State daily (webinar, phone, email) - Transmitted via social media and newspaper (slower) - Challenged by competing sources of data
RQ3: Developed Understanding	- Networking and relationship building is key - Decisions based on science and experts	- Sought to ask the right questions to gain insights - Partisan politics not helpful - Sought to do what was in constituent's best interest - Decisions based on science and experts	- Partisan politics not helpful - Sided with medical experts and science for decisions	- Sided with medical experts and science for decisions - Sought to remain objective (apolitical) as much as possible in execution of duties	- Collaborative leadership - Adaptive approach - Stressed team effort - Challenged by politics creating animosity and marginalization of position

The first research sub-question was, "How did the civic leaders describe their crisis leadership experiences regarding decision making efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic?" The theme that emerged was *adapt to survive*, and the assertion that emerged was *adaptation is essential to operate in a complex environment*. For example, the city manager relied on his team and experts to assist in decision making noting, "I relied on their creativity and ideas to try to return things to normal service as soon as possible." He added, "I learned it is most important to

get input from stakeholders in an emergency situation, that's a pretty small circle, and once I've done that to make quick and decisive decisions rather than delaying." The chief of police took an adaptive leadership approach and experimented to make the best decisions. His description of learning to "fly an airplane while you're building it" encapsulates this concept. The comments of "you sort of learn and you adjust" along with "in some regards, it's through practice and a little luck. That's probably about the best way to describe it" reinforce the need to adapt by learning through experimentation. The county health official's collaborative approach to constructing meaning and stressing the value of a team effort also provides evidence for this assertion of adaptation. Vince noted, "it was a team effort" and added "it was all of those entities sitting down and having discussions regarding what they thought was the best way to move forward." Both comments reveal an open-minded, adaptive approach to decision making. Getting input from others, being willing to experiment, and taking a collaborative leadership style are all examples of an adaptive approach during a crisis.

The second research question explored communication efforts, "How did the civic leaders describe their crisis leadership experiences regarding communication efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic?" The themes that emerged were *information management is critical*, *effective communication is paramount*, and *politics trumps science*. The question also revealed data for two assertions—*social media can be an effective means of communication*, and *the politicization of health issues can have adverse effects*.

The city manager and both elected officials commented on the effectiveness of social media, in this case Facebook Live, to transmit information to constituents. The mayor's comment of needing to "have Facebook Live town halls to keep constituents informed in a timely manner" emphasizes this point. He added, "Facebook Live was the most straightforward and direct way to

communicate with the constituents." These examples highlight the potential value of social media during a crisis. However, if there is a battle for the narrative by competing factions, the challenge of determining the veracity of the information may be questioned. This battle for the narrative was captured by the next assertion that discusses the consequences of politicizing a health issue.

Even though the elected officials made decisions based on scientific and medical advice to reduce the spread of COVID-19, the decisions were interpreted by some constituents as being politically driven. Tim, the city commissioner, recounted "this was an issue that turned into being somewhat of a political issue, almost more so than a medical issue." Following the passing of the city's mask mandate, he recalled angry remarks by a constituent who opposed the decision and declared, "You're taking away my Constitutional right! You're evil! You're the devil? And this is just your way of trying to control us all." Vince's comment of "politics trumps science" sums up the tension between the city officials and some of the constituents who disagreed.

Continuing with the research sub-question of communication efforts, the combination of the politicization of COVID-19, together with the ability of social media to rapidly influence an audience, made determining the veracity of the data a challenge for the various crisis leaders. For instance, Joe the chief of police, received conflicting information from the Federal government, state, and county which led to frustration. He noted, "The information management by the federal government and state government was as difficult as anything that I've ever experienced…for obvious reasons, most of it dealt with the political viewpoints about the COVID event." Joe summarized this experience recalling, "social media was a disaster. The message from the federal government was entirely different from the state government, and that was because of political party affiliations." He further added, "we all knew that politics were

guiding most of the key people and the messages they were communicating." The mayor also recalled his polarized interactions with state officials noting that,

> Depending on the political party of the state officials, they quickly went to their corners. Consequently, in order to find out what their positions were on various issues, I had to keep track of the various articles that were being published.

His quote highlights the challenges of information management and sorting through potential political biases.

The third research sub-question considered how the participants made sense of what was occurring. "What ways did the civic leaders develop a sense of understanding from their interactions with state officials, fellow civic leaders, and citizens of the municipality during the pandemic?" The theme that emerged was *relationships matter*. The assertion that emerged was *positive working relationships are critical during a crisis*. The data revealed it was a collaborative effort between the civic leaders to determine what was going on and to determine the best way forward. This collaborative effort was enabled by the relationships the leaders had between each other. The importance of relationships is the fourth assertion. The city manager summarizes this finding most succinctly, "I gained a further appreciation for networking and building relationships and how that pays off at a time of crisis." The chief of police provided a response that also reinforced the value of relationships noting that, "within our county, and especially within a small town like ours, the difference is we all know each other." He provided an example of how this was beneficial at his level, "Everyone talks about community policing being pie-in-the-sky, but at the local level, it comes down to relationships." The relationship, mentioned above, between the city manager, the chief of police, and the county health official also enabled rapid execution of decisions, such as implementing vaccinations, and supporting

initiatives, such as establishing the Joint Information Center. The mayor also noted the value in having a close relationship during this crisis period. He opined, "I had to have a close working relationship with the city manager…I wanted to make sure we 'were on the same sheet of music' at least on the most pressing matters facing the Commissioners and the city."

Summary

Chapter 4 provides a summary of the findings from the research. The interviews revealed five themes and four assertions. The five themes are—information management is critical, effective communication is paramount, relationships matter, adapt to survive, and politics trumps science. The chapter discussed the flow of information and the role each participant played. The city commissioner's comment regarding sorting "fact from myth" encapsulates the challenge civic leaders had determining the veracity of the information they received. The theme of communication revealed the effectiveness of social media as a means to disseminate information quickly to wide audiences. The city manager summarized the importance of the relationship theme by noting "relationship building is key." The research also revealed the value of having relationships established prior to a crisis event. The next theme, adapt to survive, proved an effective technique for the civic leaders operating in a complex environment. Maintaining an open mindset was a critical element associated with this theme. The final theme regarding the politicization of the pandemic was best summarized by the county health officer who lamented, "politics trumps science." The city commissioner also opined how the pandemic was the most polarizing social event in American history in the last 50 years.

From the research, I developed four assertions. The first is that adaptation is essential to operate successfully in a complex environment. The second assertion is that social media can be an effective means to transmit information to wide audiences quickly. The third is the adverse

effect that may occur when a health issue becomes politicized. The final assertion is that positive working relationships are critical during a crisis.

Chapter 5 - Discussion and Conclusion

Introduction

This chapter summarizes the findings and conclusions derived from the data discussed in the earlier chapters. It provides a brief review of the study, discusses how the findings relate to the literature, and identifies one unexpected finding. The chapter concludes with implications for scholars and crisis leaders while also proposing recommendations for further research.

Review of the Study

When this study began, a clear gap existed regarding an examination of crisis leadership from the perspectives of the leaders on the frontline of the pandemic—the municipal leaders. Consequently, the purpose of the study was to explore the leadership experiences of a small city government (population of approximately 35,000) in the Midwestern United States. This study specifically examined the crisis leadership experiences of the civic leaders responsible for recommending and making decisions to prevent, contain, and decrease the spread of COVID-19 in the city during the pandemic.

To enable this examination, the primary research question asked, "What themes emerged from this study of crisis leadership during the COVID crisis from March 11, 2020, through March 31, 2021?" To refine this question further, three sub-questions were formed that helped address the issues of decision making, communication, and meaning making: "How did the civic leaders describe their crisis leadership experiences regarding decision making efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic?" "How did the civic leaders describe their crisis leadership experiences regarding communication efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic?" And "What ways did the civic leaders develop a sense of understanding from their interactions with state officials, fellow civic leaders, and the citizens of the municipality during the pandemic?"

Applying the narrative inquiry methodology, the study examined the experiences of five municipal leaders—the city manager, the mayor, a city commissioner, the chief of police, and the county health official, during the first year of the pandemic from March 11, 2020, through March 31, 2021. Using the first cycle coding techniques of initial, in vivo, and process coding, and second cycle coding techniques of focused, axial, and pattern coding, five themes and four assertions emerged from the data. The five themes were: information management is critical, effective communication is paramount, relationships matter, adapt to survive, and politics trumps science. The four assertions that emerged were: adaptation is essential to successfully operate in a complex environment, social media can be an effective means to transmit information quickly to wide audiences, the politicization of an issue can distort information by filtering or interweaving a narrative, and lastly, positive working relationships are critical during a crisis.

A synopsis of the major findings, based on the themes and assertions, is summarized as follows. Accurate information is critical for decision making. This information may become biased if the issue at hand, in this case COVID-19, becomes politicized. This politicization may lead to a subjective convergence of information to support a particular narrative. As such, sorting through the veracity of the information proved challenging for the civic leaders. They struggled to determine what to do and what was necessary to communicate to the various constituents and stakeholders. Fortunately, social media proved an effective tool in helping convey timely information to wide audiences. Positive relationships between key leaders proved of great value, and it is best to establish these relationships early and foster the bonds of trust before a crisis event. Finally, adaptation proved an effective technique for functioning in a complex environment, such as the one generated by the pandemic.

This study met all four of Charmaz's (2014) criteria for evaluating qualitative studies: credibility, originality, resonance, and usefulness. Regarding credibility, the researcher was familiar with the topic of crisis leadership and had previous working relationships with each of the participants which enabled a candid exchange of information during the interviews. Sufficient data was collected from the interviews and a strong linkage was established between the data, themes, and assertions. The study achieved originality since the pandemic was a relatively recent phenomenon; and there was a paucity of research regarding crisis leadership and the pandemic. Resonance was achieved by providing greater insights regarding the experiences of those studied. The study also revealed the second order effects of politicizing an issue. Finally, the usefulness of the study was achieved and will be discussed in greater detail in the conclusion.

Discussion of Findings

The literature review of crisis leadership covered a wide range of topics. Based on the constraints of time and a need to concentrate efforts, the study focused the review on decision making, communication, and meaning making during a crisis. From this construct, the research questions were developed. The answers to these questions provided the data from which five themes and four assertions emerged. Each theme is subsequently cross walked with its corresponding literary reference.

Information Management Is Critical

As discussed in Chapter 2, the three broad competencies required for a leader during a crisis are *awareness* of the crisis, *actions* taken by the leader, and *learning* as a result of the event. The *information* theme flows through all three of these competencies and is prominent during the awareness and action phase. For example, the importance of information can be seen in the first four phases of Wooten and James's (2008) leadership competencies of "signal

detection, prevention and preparation, containment of damages, and business recovery" (p. 364). These four phases also align in chronological order. In the study, the city officials received their information from the federal government, state, and county. Early on, the city focused on detection, determining the extent of the threat (COVID-19), and finding ways to prevent the spread or mitigate the impact of the virus (contain). To enable this, the county established a Joint Information Center (JIC) as a data collection hub and source of information for the cities. This aligns with Fischer et al.'s (2016) study that noted it is of vital importance to disseminate critical information in a timely manner, especially to those organizations responsible for leading through a crisis. Consequently, information from the JIC was used by civic leaders to enable their decision-making process. As noted by Weick et al. (2005), sense-making requires an understanding of what is happening so a plan of action can be developed.

Maitlis and Sonenshein (2010) describe sense-making consisting of three parts: identifying the various cues, assigning meaning from existing models and frameworks, and then formulating a plan for action. Obviously, information provides the data for the cues, and it is information that is communicated by the leaders once a plan of action is determined. Vince, the county health official, realized decision makers were using his information to develop their plans. Consequently, he "prided himself on the accuracy of his data." In Las Aguilas, the crisis leaders invested a large amount of time sorting through multiple sources of information to identify the various cues and make meaning. Don, the mayor, recalled, "We were trying to ascertain the information, without getting wrapped up in all the details of what was most important and what needed to be communicated." Likewise, Tim, the city commissioner noted "We were disseminating a lot of information. It felt like we were being fed with a firehose." A corollary to the information theme is the communication theme which is discussed next.

Effective Communication Is Paramount

As noted by Stam et al. (2018), during a crisis followers will turn to the leaders and expect them to effectively communicate the way ahead during a crisis. The mayor, Don, realized this as well with his comments of communications being the "lifeblood" of an organization and expressing the desire to keep his fellow city commissioners and constituents informed. Don also chose Facebook Live as the means to communicate with the constituents and found this his "most effective way to communicate."

The mayor's use of social media aligns with several of Seeger's (2006) crisis communication best practices. For example, the mayor's interactions with the public during Facebook Live town hall sessions align with Seeger's (2006) practice of "partnering with the public" (p.238). Facebook Live also allowed the mayor to listen to the public and understand their concerns. Inviting guest speakers and subject matter experts to attend the mayor's town hall meetings also aligns with Seeger's (2006) best practice of "collaborating and coordinating with credible sources" (p.240). The mayor also maintained full transparency by remaining honest, candid, and open, which is another best practice. However, communications were not without challenges.

Fischer et al.'s (2016) study discusses barriers to communication during a crisis that could arise for multiple reasons. Examples include a lack of trust between crisis responders, filtering of messages between organizations, and misinterpreting important messages, or having a low confidence in the information received. All of these examples played out in Las Aguilas. The mayor and the chief of police noted the different guidance they received based on the political affiliation of the sender. As Joe, the chief of police, noted, "We all knew that politics were guiding most of the key people and their messages they were communicating." Don, the

mayor, also commented that “partisan politics” were at play. It is important to note, the governor of this particular state was of a different political affiliation than the President of the United States during the first year of the pandemic. The county officials were also from a different political affiliation than the governor. Consequently, the aspects of filtering, misinterpreting, and having a low confidence in the information received all manifested themselves in Las Aguilas. The state legislature expressed concerns regarding trust by proposing House Bill 2285 (2023), which attempted to restrict the authorities of the state secretary of health and local health officers to include quarantining infected individuals. This restriction of authorities relegated the health officials to a mere advisory role.

The county health official’s desire to put out accurate information aligns with Coombs’s (2007) need to protect and organization’s reputation. Vince, the county health official, knew other organizations were transmitting a lot of information, but it “was not necessarily the most accurate.” Therefore, he strove to “keep everybody as up to date as we could, especially those who needed to make decisions early on.” He realized his organization’s credibility relied on the accuracy of the information he was putting out. This desire for credibility also explains the frustrations he felt when information would rapidly change noting, “it was the struggle of trying to save face or the reputation of the public health agency’s jurisdiction.”

Social Media

After reviewing the themes of information and communication, discussing the assertion regarding social media is a logical transition. This study asserts that social media can be an effective tool enabling crisis leaders to transmit information quickly to a wide audience. For example, Lee et al.’s (2017) literature review of crisis information enablers noted the effectiveness of Twitter as a social media enabler. Twitter is a social media networking service

and is often used by celebrities and public figures to transmit messages. In the case of the pandemic, the mayor leveraged the social media enabler of Facebook Live as a means to broadcast bi-weekly town hall meetings to the public. He noted those meetings over social media were, "my most effective way to communicate." The city manager, Glenn, also noted the meeting's popularity and the benefit of recording the sessions so constituents could watch them at their convenience. He recalled, "we were getting hundreds of views and impressions from those. So, we relied on social media." This use of social media also aligns with Stam et al.'s (2018) finding that during a crisis, followers expect leaders to communicate effectively paying particular attention to how the leader plans to guide the organization through the crisis. The mayor's bi-weekly meetings did this by keeping the citizens apprised of the severity of the pandemic and also on the plans for the way forward.

The mayor's use of social media as a communication tool is also congruent with Comfort et al.'s (2020) four basic functions of crisis decision-making: cognition, communication, coordination, and control. The mayor made the public aware of the crisis (*cognition*). He *communicated* with the public via the Facebook Live broadcast. He also *coordinated* with other subject matter experts to participate in the virtual townhall meetings and inform the public which facilities were opened and what had changed due to health restrictions. Finally, he helped with the function of *control* by informing the public of the impact the various health restrictions would have on operations, such as masking and social distancing. In the case of this last function, *control*, social media was more of a means of informing and helping manage public expectations, vice an instrument of control.

Relationships Matter

The next theme discussed is the value of relationships. One way to highlight the value of relationships is to understand what might happen if relationships are not there. Fischer et al.'s (2016) discussion on social barriers in communication cites a lack of trust between crisis responders as an example. If one organization does not trust the other, the ability of the two groups to work together will be inhibited. Fortunately for the crisis responders in Las Aguilas, this was not the case. Previous relationships existed and were strong. As the chief of police noted, his relationship with the county health official went back 25 years. An example of the benefit of this relationship was demonstrated when the county wanted to establish a vaccination cite. A simple phone call between the two responders achieved results. Vince, the county health official, told Joe, the chief of police, what he needed and together they worked out the support requirements. As Joe noted, "I know Vince, Vince knows me, Glenn (the city manager) knows Vince." This existing relationship enabled the crisis responders to act quickly and achieve results. Glenn also commented on the value relationships had with regard to networking. These relationships enabled him to gain important information, compare notes with what the other cities were doing, and determine a collaborative approach to challenges. He noted, "being able to talk to peers and colleagues about the situation, beyond just what was written in health orders, I think made our organization's responses stronger…networking and relationship building is key."

Another aspect of a relationship is the city government's relationship with the public. Seeger's (2006) study of crisis communication identifies *partnerships with the public* as a best practice for public officials. He notes the public feels they have a right to know what is going on and consequently public officials can benefit from "accepting the public as a legitimate and equal partner" (p. 238) during a crisis. The mayor's willingness to have routine town hall meetings

broadcast via social media is an example of the city's efforts to maintain positive relationships with the public. This effort also reinforced Seeger's (2006) best practice of demonstrating *honesty, candor, and openness* to maintain trust.

Coombs's (2007) situational crisis communication theory also addresses *prior relationships* between the organization and the stakeholders. In this study, the organization was the city government, and the stakeholders were the voting constituents. Coombs (2007) notes how well an organization deals with the concerns of the stakeholder will determine the strength of the relationship. If the concerns are dealt with satisfactorily, the organization is likely to be given the benefit of the doubt and the relationship stays strong. However, if the concerns are not satisfactorily addressed, trust deteriorates, and the relationship weakens. Tim, the city commissioner's vignette of experiencing people "screaming at him" and sensing a "mob mentality" and "pounding on my car as I was leaving" are obvious examples of dissatisfaction from the stakeholders (the voting constituents) and a weakening relationship. These examples, cross referenced with literary sources, also support the study's assertion that relationships are of critical importance during a crisis.

Adapt to Survive

Adaptation is the next theme of the study, with the assertion being adaptation is an important leader behavior in the complex environment of a crisis. For example, James and Wooten (2011) identify a crisis leader must have a "propensity to reflect, learn, and adapt" (p. 61) as one of the five necessary leader characteristics. The chief of police, Joe, and the county health official, Vince, displayed several of these adaptive characteristics.

Vince demonstrated adaptability when recalling how the county adjusted as the virus mutated noting, "we had to change things up. I mean we had to adapt on a regular basis…we had

to figure out how to deal with things as the virus changed and mutated." Vince recalled establishing the Incident Command System (ICS) and populating it with high caliber people from multiple organizations. He noted "It was all of those entities sitting down and having discussions regarding what they thought was the best way to move forward." This collaborative approach and willingness to listen to others demonstrated adaptability in a complex environment.

Joe's description of "learning to fly an airplane while you're building it" also conveys an adaptive approach. He recalled, "you sort of learn and you adjust." His willingness to "try something different" established a climate of experimentation and learning within the organization. He noted the requirement to "have a different mindset" and "the need for patience and the realization that things were not going to be perfect."

The adaptive approaches, demonstrated by Vince and Joe, are in line with what Ansell et al. (2020) describe as ways public leaders will need to deal with *turbulent problems*. Ansell et al. (2020) define *a turbulent problem* as "the surprising emergence of inconsistent, unpredictable, and uncertain events" (p. 949) which is an apt way of describing the COVID-19 pandemic. They note effective ways for public leaders to deal with *turbulent problems* are by using a collective leadership style, learning to solve problems with incomplete data, being able to influence others without authority, and improving communication skills. Both Vince and Joe clearly displayed collective leadership styles and a willingness to solve problems with incomplete data. And, the mayor and city manager, as previously discussed, improved communication skills via the use of social media during the crisis. Together, these demonstrate examples of adaptation during the pandemic.

Politics Trumps Science

The final theme deals with the politicization of the pandemic. In Boin's (2009) discussion on executive-level tasks during a crisis, he notes one of the challenges is the possibility of political tensions regarding who may be held accountable for what occurred. While the debate of what occurred remained mostly at the national level, it was the politicization of how best to respond to the challenge of the virus that became divisive. As the county health official, Vince, recalled,

> With the fellow civic leaders, we learned that politics trumps science a lot of times. At the beginning everybody was really looking to public health and their information, and we were kind of on board with that. But we saw it switch quickly. As the information through the pandemic kept going, it was apparent that a lot of the decisions being made were publicly driven versus following the recommendations coming from the public health.

Don, the mayor, noted "It wasn't very helpful that people were playing partisan politics within our community, within the state, and at the federal level on all of this." Tim, the city commissioner remembered the backlash that would follow the decision to impose mask wearing and social distancing. He recalled, "I think the biggest challenge was knowing the pushback that you were going to get." Following the passing of the mask mandate, Tim noted one person claiming, "You're taking away my Constitutional right!"

The risks associated with making unpopular decisions can be very high for politicians. Crayne and Medeiros (2021) note that these risks may be even higher for elected officials who are responsible for protecting the lives and the businesses of their constituents. Tim, the city commissioner, acknowledged this and added, "sometimes you get to that point in your life where

you are not checking the political winds. It (voting to impose the mask mandate and social distancing) was the right thing to do, and we did it." He later opined that politicizing the pandemic, "caused more polarization in the United States than any other event that I can think of since the Vietnam War." However, in spite of doing what they felt was right, as previously discussed; both the mayor, Don, and the city commissioner, Tim, were not reelected. They attribute losing the subsequent election to their decision to impose mask and social distancing restrictions.

Although the World Health Organization officially declared an end to the global pandemic on May 5, 2023 (Rigby & Satija, 2023), political efforts resulting from the pandemic were still ongoing at the time of this study. The state legislature proposing House Bill 2285 (2023) is an example. This bill called for a restriction of the abilities of the state secretary of health and local health officers to "control the spread of infections or contagious diseases" and a repeal of the authority of the secretary to "quarantine individuals and impose penalties for the violation thereof." As Vince, the county health official expressed concern, "I think we're really pushing the wrong way." He justified this comment with a discussion of how rapidly viruses can spread due to modern means of transportation. Consequently, if health officials are unable to impose quarantines and health restrictions, future viral outbreaks in this particular state, may be even more deadly than the COVID-19 pandemic.

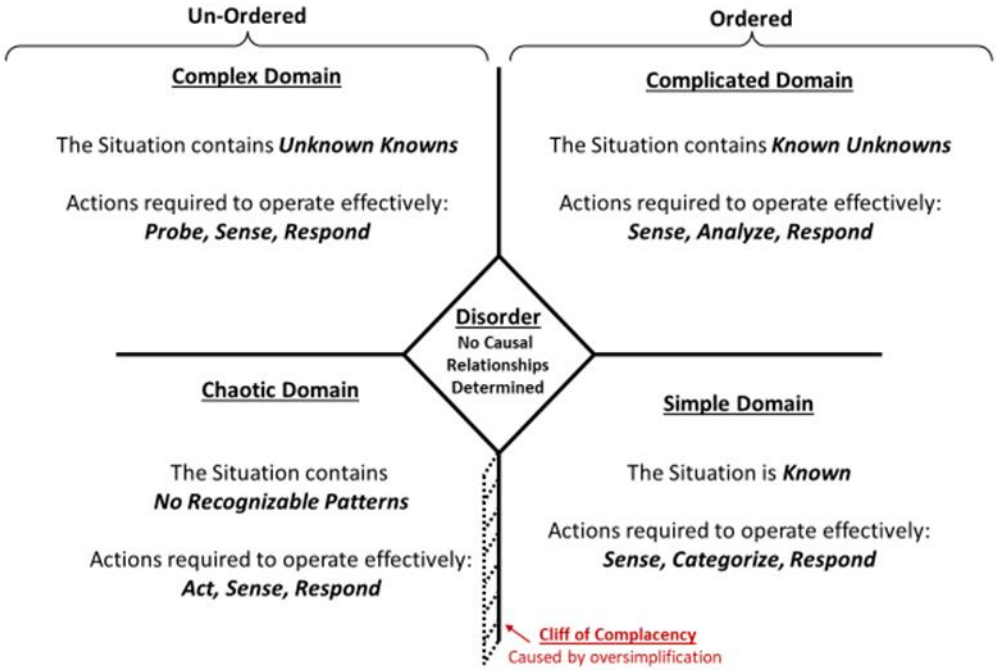
Cynefin Framework

Ansell et al.'s (2020) description of a *turbulent problem* is useful in helping understand the role the Cynefin Framework could play in a crisis. The description specifically mentions "inconsistent, unpredictable, and uncertain events" (p. 949) which indicates that either causal

pattern recognition does not exist, or it is at least delayed. This correlates to the left-hand side of the Cynefin Framework—the un-ordered side—that consists of the chaotic and complex domains. See Figure 10.

Figure 12

The Cynefin Framework



Note. The Cynefin Framework drawn from Kurtz and Snowden, 2003, p. 468 and Brougham, 2015, p. 6.

Consequently, the question for crisis leaders is how best to respond. Lane et al. (2021), who write about the Cynefin Framework in healthcare settings, suggest "acting-probing-sensing-responding" (p. 454) due to the urgency of immediate action given a life-threatening situation. This act-probe-sense-respond action indicates a situation that would be initially in the chaotic domain and transitions to the complex domain.

Without specifically referencing the Cynefin Framework, both Vince, the county health official, and Joe, the chief of police, acted in a manner that corresponds with the complex domain

of the Cynefin Framework. For example, Vince admitted early on that "It was information that none of us had ever dealt with before." This indicates he realized previous mental models and experiences were no longer applicable. Consequently, they decided "the best thing that we could do was just to come together as a group and really evaluate the information that was coming into us." Vince added, "we had to adapt on a regular basis." Similarly, Joe's actions of looking for someone to talk to and ask "Hey, when you guys had this situation last time, what did you do?" are indicative of a desire to engage subject matter experts and attempt to establish a known pattern. However, doing nothing was not an option, so Joe developed a plan and adapted. His statement of "You sort of learn and you adjust. You kind of get to the right spot, sort of intentionally. In some regards it's through practice and a little luck" reflects a *probe-sense-respond* sequence which is applicable in the complex domain. More importantly, Joe discussed the need to have a "different mindset" and pointed out that "you are going to have to be really open to confronting an entirely new dynamic" and "you're going to have to work incredibly hard to define those three or four critical components of success." These statements reflect a realization that establishing a learning environment that included experimentation to determine what works best was necessary. His advice of remaining "as patient as you can, just understanding that it's going to go off the rails and sideways given this kind of event (the pandemic)" also reflects a calm demeanor and one that is not discouraged by failure. Both characteristics are important when establishing a learning environment.

In the study of Las Aguilas, the crisis leaders invested a considerable amount of time trying to obtain and interpret the correct information so they could then decide and act. This correlates with understanding which Cynefin domain is most appropriate for a given situation. However, this process became less clear as information began transmitting through a political

filter. This distortion or filtering led to considerable frustration for the mayor and city commissioner. Kurtz and Snowden (2003) observe that disorder can be generated when a difference of opinion exists between decision makers. This condition was manifested in the study.

The Gestalt of the Findings

While the preceding sections discussed the individual themes and how they relate to the existing literature, a new contribution emerges when the sum of the individual themes are considered as a whole—the gestalt of the findings. This new contribution concerns the impact social media and politicizing an issue can have on the confluence of the information and communication efforts.

This study discussed how information and communication are interrelated. However, the study also revealed the implications social media can have on both information and communication efforts. While social media can be an effective way to communicate, real or near real time information, it can also be a source of either raw data or filtered information. If the data is raw, then it is incumbent on the recipient to think critically and determine the veracity of the information. If the information is filtered, it may be subjected to a particular narrative or slant before released. While a slant on a story may be considered an author's bias, as sometimes present in print media, the situation becomes more complex with social media, since it can have a propensity to reach more audiences at a quicker rate than print media. It is both the vast quantity of recipients and the speed at which information can be transmitted that makes social media a powerful element in the communication field.

The study also revealed the inordinate amount of time civic leaders spent sorting through information to determine what was truthful, what was spun with a certain narrative, and what

was in the best interest of the constituents. As a result, this study showed the confluence of social media into the information and communication streams and the challenges to objectivity that may result. This is significant since objective information is needed to make accurate decisions and to communicate effectively.

Political parties also leveraged the power of social media to influence audiences during the pandemic. As a result, people affiliated certain actions, such as mask wearing, with a certain political party instead of looking at the practice through an objective health perspective. From a crisis leadership perspective, the intertwining of social media and the politicization of an issue can greatly interfere with a linear logic crisis model. Based on social media's power to influence, I predict the politicization of issues, regardless of the topic (health, environment, business, etc.) will continue. When it comes to the veracity of social media, viewer discretion is advised.

Implications

The following paragraphs consider this study's implications for crisis leaders and first responders in relation to the five themes previously discussed. These implications also apply to elected officials in crisis leadership positions, with one caveat, as noted by Crayne and Medeiros (2021)—the risks to re-election become extremely high during a crisis situation. Implications for scholarship are also considered.

Implications for Crisis Leaders and First Responders

Information management is critical. Accurate information is essential to good decision making. In a manner similar to scholarly research, city leaders should ensure the information used for decision making is valid, from a reliable source, and free from bias. Regarding validity, does the information accurately report what it is intended to convey? Likewise, is the source of the information consistently reliable; does the source consistently report accurate information? In

other words, is it a creditable source? And is the information as objective as possible to avoid any intended bias? Simply put, sound decisions are highly dependent on accurate information. If the information is not valid, from an unreliable source, or biased, the results may very likely lead to poor decisions.

Effective communication is paramount. Communicating effectively is one of the most important tasks for leaders during a crisis. To be effective, city leaders should be as truthful and transparent as possible by communicating as early and as often as practical. This will help establish and maintain a bond of trust between the city leaders, stakeholders, and constituents.

Social media is currently an effective way to communicate to wide audiences, near simultaneously. City leaders should stay knowledgeable and proficient on the latest means of social media and dedicate time and resources to keeping public information websites updated, especially during a crisis. City leaders should also be familiar with which means of social media resonate best with various stakeholders and constituents. During the crisis, city leaders should expect to use multiple means of social media to ensure the message is delivered effectively.

Relationships matter. Pre-existing relationships between city leaders are essential during a crisis. As such, investing time in establishing and building relationships is one of the most important activities a city leader can perform. Once positive relationships are established, mutual trust can be extended between the various leaders. This extension of trust will enable quicker response times between agencies and facilitate rapid decision-making between key leaders. Consequently, city leaders should make a concerted effort to establish relationships with other key leaders and agencies immediately upon entering office. These relationships should then be fostered throughout the tenure of the city leader's position. In summary, the time to establish

relationships is not when a crisis begins, but rather before. When the crisis hits, a firm foundation built upon trusted relationships needs to already exist in the city.

Adapt to survive. Chaos and complexity should be expected during a crisis. Therefore, city leaders will need to adapt quickly in order to be successful. Adaptation can be fostered by leaders who have the proper mindset, establish an effective work environment, and adopt an adaptive leadership approach for the crisis situation.

The proper mindset for a crisis is an open, or growth (Dweck, 2006), mindset that understands that failure is a learning moment, and encourages experimentation to determine what works and what does not. The open mindset does not rely on preconceived mental models to provide solutions, but rather analyzes the situation to understand how the systems work and to identify causal relationships. Since the crisis environment is expected to be chaotic and complex, sensemaking models, such as the Cynefin Framework, are extremely useful. For example, the trial-and-error approach, mentioned above, is reflected in the Cynefin Framework's probe-sense-respond approach to a complex environment.

During a crisis, an effective work environment is a learning environment that encourages a willingness to experiment to find the best way forward. In a learning environment leaders realize that failure is expected, and likely encouraged, to help discover solutions to complex problems. An effective learning environment also incorporates a collaborative approach to problem solving where all voices are heard and divergent ideas are welcomed.

City leaders should also consider adopting an adaptive leadership approach (Heifetz, et al., 1994) during, or even before, a crisis. This approach includes asking subordinates how to solve problems, remaining open-minded, and protecting the voices from below. Since establishing causal relationships is delayed in a chaotic or complex environment, the immediate

solution to a complex problem is often not readily apparent. Thus, by assuming an adaptive leadership approach that protects the voices from below, city leaders can ensure diversity of thought that will enable finding emergent solutions to complex problems.

Politics trump science. When issues become politicized, the situation may get complicated. If this occurs, city leaders should expect information, or the narrative, to become filtered to reflect more favorably on a particular, possibly partisan, point of view. This may result in conflicting guidance from the various levels of government (federal, state, county) depending on party affiliations. While the politicization of an issue may not be avoidable, city leaders should remain alert to this possibility throughout the crisis.

City leaders should also expect the risks to elected officials to increase if an issue becomes politicized during a crisis. This risk will be exacerbated if the health of constituents or the livelihood of businesses are involved. In these situations, city leaders may find themselves wrestling with an ethical dilemma if they are worried about reelection.

Implications for Scholarship

The previous paragraphs primarily discussed the implications of this finding as they pertain to practitioners—the crisis leaders. This study also reveals implications for the scholarly realm with regard to reinforcing findings from existing literature, bridging the gap in existing literature, and demonstrating the value of understanding complexity theory. I will review each in greater detail.

This study reinforced some of the findings from previous studies on crisis leadership. For example, two of James and Wooten's (2011) five necessary leadership characteristic for crisis leaders, *reflecting, learning, and adapting* and *establishing trust,* were demonstrated by several of the participants. The mayor's and city manager's actions also reinforced Shrivastava's (1993)

point about maintaining *public relations*. The chief of police and county health official's actions also emphasized the importance of Boin's (2009) point of *learning while operating*. Together, these findings reinforce the importance of crisis leaders learning to adapt in a complex or chaotic environment.

Next, this study begins to help bridge the gap regarding research on crisis leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic. As previously discussed in Chapter 2, research on this subject is just beginning to emerge. This study's findings can now be used as a baseline for future research.

Finally, this study demonstrates the value of crisis leaders having a familiarity with complexity theory. Since a crisis is very likely to produce a chaotic and complex environment, it would behoove crisis leaders to learn how to adapt and function effectively in these environments. Crisis leaders should appreciate that a complex system consists of interacting parts, or agents, that may respond to feedback or stimulus from the environment. Complex systems can also display ordered and disordered behaviors and act in a non-linear fashion. As such, sense making models, like the Cynefin Framework, offer a starting point for crisis leaders to better understand complexity. Encouraging crisis leaders to look for and understand possible causal relationships before making decisions can also help mitigate the risk of making the wrong, or poor, decisions that could further exacerbate problems during a crisis. Consequently, graduate degree programs that appeal to civic and crisis leaders, such as a Masters in Public Administration, might very well benefit from adding a class to their curriculum that addresses complexity theory and how to adapt in complex environments.

Recommendations for Further Research

There are three recommendations for further research regarding the examination of crisis leadership during the pandemic—a longitudinal study, a meta-analysis, and increasing the sample size. Due to the chronological constraints of this study, only the first year of the pandemic was considered. Future research that expands the time period considered beyond the first year of the pandemic might prove useful.

The next recommendation is to conduct a meta-analysis with other COVID-related leadership studies. As discovered during the literature review, there was scant information regarding research on crisis leadership during the pandemic. As such, decision makers had to rely on previous examples of crises such as the Three Mile Island disaster or Hurricane Katrina. While helpful, each crisis is unique and lessons from one crisis may not apply to another. However, over time, a comparative study from multiple research efforts regarding crisis leadership during the pandemic may prove worthwhile. I estimate it may take another five years until there is sufficient information for comparison.

The sample size for this study, while sufficient for narrative inquiry methods, was relatively small—five participants. Future studies may consider increasing the sample size to support a grounded theory approach to examine the same phenomenon. Also, this study examined crisis leaders in a small city in the Midwest United States. Further research may consider crisis leaders from different locations in the United States, or other countries. Future studies may also compare the crisis leadership experiences of decision makers from larger cities with similar forms of governments. For example, the cities of Phoenix, Topeka, and San Antonio all exercise a similar *council-manager* form of government as exercised by the participants in this study (National Civic League, 2022).

Conclusion

This study examined the leadership experiences of a small city government during the pandemic. It revealed how one city functioned in a complex environment. The key to the city's success was learning to adapt in this type of environment and leveraging existing relationships. The research showed how a crisis situation may generate a disordered environment that resembles the Cynefin Framework's chaotic and complex domains where causal relationships are difficult to establish. Consequently, a leader's familiarity with the Cynefin Framework and the subsequent actions that may be appropriate for the various domains, such as probing, sensing, and responding in a complex environment, might prove useful. The data also revealed how assuming an open-minded and adaptive approach to leadership during a crisis proved effective in a complex environment. Finally, the value of pre-existing relationships that extend trust proved vital.

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Appendix A - Research Alignment Table

Research Questions	Interview Questions
R1. How did the civic leaders describe their crisis leadership experiences regarding decision making efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic?	Q1. Please tell me about your specific role and responsibility as a municipal leader. Q2. Can you describe the timeline of events when you first learned about the COVID-19 pandemic and its possible threat to your constituents? Q3. Could you share what a typical day as a municipal leader during the pandemic and provide as much detail as you can recall? Q4. On which of your civic leadership tasks did you spend most of your time? Q5. How did you make sense about what was happening so you could make informed decisions? Q6. Please describe the biggest challenges you had regarding decision making.
R2. How did the civic leaders describe their crisis leadership experiences regarding communication efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic?	Q1. Can you describe the greatest challenges you felt regarding communication efforts? Q2. What was the most effective way to communicate with: a. state officials? b. fellow civic leaders? c. municipal citizens?
R3. What ways did the civic leaders develop a sense of understanding from their interactions with state officials, fellow civic leaders, and	Q1. What did you learn from your interactions with: a. state officials? b. fellow civic leaders? c. municipal citizens?

citizens of the municipality during the pandemic?	Q2. Overall, what did you learn about crisis leadership from the COVID-19 pandemic? Q3. Is there any other information you would like to share that you feel may be relevant to this study? Q4. Is there anything you would like to ask me?

Appendix B - IRB Consent Form

PROJECT TITLE:

Pandemic on the plains: A study in crisis leadership

PROJECT APPROVAL DATE:		**PROJECT EXPIRATION DATE:**		**LENGTH OF STUDY:**	

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:	Dr. Royce Ann Collins, Educational Leadership Department
CO-INVESTIGATOR(S):	Thomas A. Shoffner, Doctoral Student
CONTACT DETAILS FOR PROBLEMS/QUESTIONS:	Dr. Royce Ann Collins, 785-532-5535, racollin@ksu.edu
IRB CHAIR CONTACT INFORMATION:	Lisa Rubin, Chair, Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224; Heath Ritter, Acting Associate Vice President for Research Compliance, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224.

PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH:

The purpose of this study is to explore the leadership experiences of a small city government (population of around 35,000) in the Midwestern United States. Specifically, this study will examine the crisis leadership experiences of the civic leaders responsible for recommending and making decisions to prevent, contain, and decrease the spread of COVID-19 in the city during the pandemic from March 11, 2020 through March 31, 2021 when the mask mandate was lifted.

PROCEDURES OR METHODS TO BE USED:

If you agree to participate in this research, you will be interviewed to learn your perspectives on your leadership experiences as a member of the municipal government during the COVID-19 pandemic. You will be asked to describe your civic leadership experiences regarding decision making and communication efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study also seeks to learn how you constructed meaning regarding your interactions with state officials, fellow civic leaders, and citizens of the municipality during the pandemic. You will be asked

to participate in a minimum of two interviews, lasting 60 to 90 minutes each. The interviews will be conducted in person, at an agreed upon private location, and digitally recorded and transcribed by the researcher. The interviews may also be conducted online, via Zoom, if you are unable to appear in person. Transcripts of the interviews will be provided to you to ensure accuracy. This will afford you an opportunity to modify any interpretation of what was said and to clarify the intention of your statements.

BIOLOGICAL SAMPLES COLLECTED (Describe procedure, storage, etc.):

N/A

Whole genome sequencing will not be included as part of the research

Not Applicable.

RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS ANTICIPATED:

There are no known risks associated with this research. You may withdraw at any time without penalty and their data will be deleted from the research study.

BENEFITS ANTICPATED:

This research could assist municipal leaders as they plan for future crisis events.

EXTENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY:

You will be given a pseudonym and no identifying characteristics will be collected. Data will be collected both via Zoom and audio recordings. You will have the opportunity to review transcripts to identify potentially sensitive data for exclusion. Data will be stored on a password protected computer in a locked office. Hard copies will be kept in a locked cabinet in the researcher's locked office and shredded by a licensed confidential shredding company three years after the completion of the dissertation. Electronic copies will be kept in a password protected computer. Data will be stored no longer than three years and will be destroyed by deleting all relevant files and physically destroying any storage discs (CDs). Data will have password protection and only the researcher will have access.

The information or biospecimens that will be collected as part of this research will not be shared with any other investigators.

IS COMPENSATION OR MEDICAL TREATMENT AVAILABLE IF INJURY OCCURS? ☐ Yes ☒ No

Terms of participation: I understand this project is research, and that my participation is voluntary. I also understand that if I decide to participate in this study, I may withdraw my consent at any time, and stop participating at any time without explanation, penalty, or loss of benefits, or academic standing to which I may otherwise be entitled.

I verify that my signature below indicates that I have read and understand this consent form, and willingly agree to participate in this study under the terms described, and that my signature acknowledges that I have received a signed and dated copy of this consent form.

(Remember that it is a requirement for the P.I. to maintain a signed and dated copy of the same consent form signed and kept by the participant).

PARTICIPANT NAME:			
PARTICIPANT SIGNATURE:		**DATE:**	
WITNESS TO SIGNATURE: (PROJECT STAFF)		**DATE:**	