



## Improvising resilience: The unfolding of resilient leadership in COVID-19 times

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1                   **“Improvising resilience: The unfolding of resilient leadership in COVID-19 times”**  
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**“Improvising resilience: The unfolding of resilient leadership in COVID-19 times”**

**Abstract**

The spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in Italy has had disastrous effects on the national economy. The hospitality sector has experienced a significant impact from the crisis: starting from March 2020 it has literally collapsed. Experts believe it will take three years for the sector to recover. Confronted with a dramatic uncertainty, which imposed rapid action, hospitality leaders need to nurture resilience. To enrich current understanding of the way resilient leadership unfolds to respond to jolts, we draw on an exploratory qualitative research involving Italian hotel managers. Following in-depth interviews, we show that resilient leadership and improvisation are deeply interconnected. Their interdependence entails two practices, namely gardening and learning. This suggests a paradoxical tension: to exercise resilience, leaders need to be at the same time *in the system*, by actively learning from events, and *outside the system*, by zooming out as they focus on ongoing planning for the next move.

*Keywords:* Resilience, leadership, improvisation, hospitality, COVID-19 pandemic, paradox.

## 1 **Introduction**

2 The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) defined COVID-19 pandemic  
3 as the worst crisis since the second world war. Being one of the countries that have been worst hit by  
4 the virus, Italy quickly went into lockdown, causing inestimable losses for the whole country (La  
5 Repubblica, 2020).

6 More than others, the hospitality sector has suffered the most immediate repercussions of the pandemic.  
7 The measures for transmission containment that were prompted by the government and the fear of  
8 travelling that has spread internationally have stopped any event, conference, convention, sports league,  
9 and have drastically driving down tourism for both business and leisure. According to ENIT<sup>1</sup>, with  
10 respect to 2019, flights booked to Italy during the 2020 peak season have dropped by almost 70%, while  
11 airport arrivals have declined by more than 60% due to antiviral restrictions. The hospitality sector has  
12 experienced a “true collapse” in the number of hotel guests: in March the Italian Federation of Hotel  
13 and Tourism Associations (Federalberghi) registered minus 92.3 percent among foreigners and minus  
14 85.9 percent among Italians compared to the previous year. In April the market collapsed completely,  
15 with -97.8% foreigners (-94.8% registered in May; Federalberghi, 2020). As tourists disappeared, more  
16 than 118,000 seasonal jobs in tourism had already been lost in May 2020. Consequently, Italy will likely  
17 miss out on around 17 billion euro of income and, in accordance with ENIT’s estimate, tourism is not  
18 expected to recover until 2023.

19 This extreme event, including its residual duration and the extension of its aftermath, will have important  
20 implications for organisation design (Foss, 2020) and its practice. This calls for the expression of  
21 resilience at several organisational levels, and leaders need to be able to cultivate such resilience (see  
22 Renjen, 2020). A variety of factors need to come into play to make leadership resilient (Giustiniano et  
23 al., 2020). However, research on this issue is still in its infancy, with most of studies focusing on the  
24 relationship between different leadership styles and the employee’s resilience (Harland et al., 2005;  
25 Sommer et al., 2016) rather than on the mechanisms for stimulating organisational resilience. COVID-  
26 19 has crafted a “new normal” that carried important social implications and evident organizational  
27 costs, calling leaders to fast action of the improvised type (i.e. planning resilience-building actions)  
28 while needing to do it improvisationally (i.e. together with the planning) (Ciuchta et al., 2021; Moorman  
29 and Miner, 1998). To this extent, the pandemic has offered a generalised extreme case for elaborating a  
30 comprehensive theoretical grounding on how leaders can use improvisation to stimulate resilience  
31 within their organisations.

32 Given the disastrous impact that COVID-19 has had on Italian tourism, we consider that the case of  
33 hospitality in Italy can be instructive for developing an enriched understanding of how resilient  
34 leadership unfolds in the presence of environmental jolts. Accordingly, in this paper we seek to explore

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<sup>1</sup> ENIT (formerly “Ente Nazionale Italiano per il Turismo”, now renamed “Agenzia Nazionale del Turismo”) is the Italian National Agency for Tourism, which is responsible for promoting tourism in Italy.

1 the process through which Italian hospitality managers exercise resilience by answering the following  
2 research question: *How do hospitality leaders improvise resilience in practice while facing the shock*  
3 *caused by COVID-19?*

4 We conducted an exploratory qualitative research on a sample of Italian hotel managers. Following in-  
5 depth interviews, we found that two main practices are involved in the improvisation of resilience: an  
6 element of ongoing preparation, which we metaphorically called “gardening”; and the capacity to learn  
7 as the crisis unfolded. These two practices imply a state of synergistic paradoxical tension between being  
8 an actor *in the system* to learn from events and being a spectator *of the system* to avoid being submerged  
9 by the events (Heifetz and Linsky, 2002). This paradoxical state of zooming in and out, working directly  
10 and indirectly, may lie at the core of resilient leadership.

## 11 **Literature review**

### 12 *Resilience: definition and major dimensions*

13 The frequent rapid changes occurring in the business environment together with the significant events  
14 distinguishing the recent political, social, and economic global scenarios make the understanding of  
15 resilience more critical than ever (Coutu, 2002). Consequently, research on resilience has attracted  
16 substantial attention from scholars with remarkable reviews and many empirical papers have appeared  
17 in major journals (see, for instance, Crane and Searle, 2016; Fisher et al., 2019; Hartmann et al., 2020;  
18 Kossek and Perrigino, 2016; Linnenluecke, 2017; Williams et al., 2017). Resilience implies a complex  
19 network of variables and it defines the capacity to absorb adversity, trauma, external shocks, or any  
20 significant sources of stress, while learning from them, preparing and responding to changes  
21 (Giustiniano et al., 2018). Therefore, being resilient denotes one getting knocked down and then getting  
22 up again, learning from events and being ready to face future challenges.

23 Most research has investigated resilience as a personal characteristic (‘resiliency’) or a static feature of  
24 collective groups or organisations (Wanberg and Banas, 2000). In contrast, in this paper we consider it  
25 as a process that helps individuals and organisations learn and feed their self-development over time.  
26 Thus, resilience is rather about “how a person weathers a storm and the learning that results, how he or  
27 she deals with a major loss, and the processes that lead to personal choices [...] and personal growth  
28 and integrity” (King and Rothstein, 2010, p. 365). In so doing, conceptualising resilience as a process  
29 places emphasis on reaching and maintaining a positive adaptation, despite experiencing adversity (Rak  
30 and Patterson, 1996).

31 In investigating resilience as a process, scholars have proposed it as being comprised of two different  
32 yet interrelated dimensions: adaptive and reactive resilience (Giustiniano et al., 2018). The former  
33 defines the capacity to absorb the impact by single-loop learning and first-order change; that is, to value,  
34 transform, and use knowledge for adaptive goals. As such, adaptive resilience manifests itself as an  
35 expression of absorptive capacity, as proposed by Zahra and George (2002). In contrast, reactive  
36 resilience refers to the ability to look at shocks and negative incidents as sources of learning and growth  
37

1 at different organisational levels, thus drawing attention to the cultivated preparedness to cope with  
2 changes and the ability to adopt new practices as a consequence of experiencing the difficulty. The  
3 reactive component thus results in a double loop learning, requiring the organisation or the individual  
4 to reflect on the actions to be adopted and to incorporate this learning in their current practices.  
5 More than conceptual dimensions, adaptive and reactive resilience embody two major conceptual  
6 templates (Langley, 1999); that is, theory-driven interpretations of the phenomenon, based on “different  
7 but internally coherent sets of a priori theoretical premises” (p. 698).  
8 Despite the richness of extant research on resilience and leadership, the necessity to infuse leadership  
9 with resilience and the call for its synthesis has been triggered by COVID-19 (e.g. Renjen, 2020).  
10 Nonetheless, despite some preliminary intuition (Giustiniano et al., 2020), resilient leadership lacks a  
11 comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms that leaders may activate to exercise resilience in the  
12 presence of severe adversities. In the next sections, we will explore improvisation as a fundamental  
13 component of facing adversity (Weick, 1993). We will also offer a tentative, initial conceptualisation of  
14 resilient leadership. This will provide a preliminary ground to our exploratory research in the hospitality  
15 industry during the spread of COVID-19 pandemic.

16

### 17 *Improvisation and resilience*

18 When confronted with a trauma or a more general source of stress, instead of acting following a  
19 meticulous plan, individuals are more likely to adjust to adversities as they emerge (Miner et al., 2001).  
20 Given that shocks and crises are difficult to predict, individuals are required to express a capacity for  
21 improvisation to successfully face and manage them (Vogus and Sutcliffe, 2012; Weick, 1993). **Hence,**  
22 **improvisation includes the need to *respond* to the unexpected in the moment, to *adapt* effectively to**  
23 **sudden changes, thereby expressing reactive and adaptive features (Abrantes et al., 2018).** Accordingly,  
24 improvisation helps organisations to respond to crises without the benefit of planning. Instead of either  
25 relying on standard procedures or waiting for instructions from the hierarchical command system,  
26 improvisation reacts to threats by emphasising openness, flexibility, autonomy, and the appreciation for  
27 impromptu action (Barrett, 2012). Consequently, improvisation is considered a ‘core skill’ of resilient  
28 organisations (Coutu, 2002).

29 Resilience and improvisation appear to be strictly related, yet different, concepts. As argued by  
30 Giustiniano et al. (2018), improvisation is the capacity to respond in the absence of planning with the  
31 available rather than with the optimal resources (Ciuchta et al., 2021; Cunha et al., 1999; Hadida et al.,  
32 2015). Therefore, it can occur in isolation; that is, it can be a one-off process, responding to an event  
33 without necessarily contributing to foster resilience. More importantly, not all unplanned actions derive  
34 from improvisation because it excludes random change, entailing a deliberate new design. As contended  
35 by Cunha et al. (1999), for improvisation to occur, at least three components should be present: first, the  
36 convergence of design and performance (i.e. extemporaneity); second, the creation of some degree of

1 novel action (i.e. novelty); and third, the deliberateness of the design that is created during its own  
2 enactment (i.e. intentionality).

3 In defining improvisation as a key component of resilience, Hadida et al. (2015) further clarify the levels  
4 at which it may happen. Individual-level improvisation occurs within a single actor, when one adjusts  
5 their own work in real time to emerging information or is “stretched beyond [...] routines to deliver a  
6 novel solution to a problem” (p. 447). Interpersonal improvisation transcends individuals, taking place  
7 in small teams where adjustments and responses result from multilateral actions, such as inputs coming  
8 from one team member that activate brainstorming and ideas within the overall team. Finally,  
9 improvisation at the organisational level “refers both to the ability of the whole organization to  
10 improvise and to the institutionalization of structures or practices that enable or lead to improvisation  
11 within the organization” (p. 448). Furthermore, Hadida et al. (2015) distinguish between different  
12 degrees at which improvisation can occur, as follows: minor, bounded, or structural degree. Minor  
13 improvisation relates to performing existing tasks in a different way, pointing to model adjustments to  
14 pre-existing processes. Bounded improvisation takes place when one improvises a different task  
15 targeting the same outcome (e.g. improvising novel processes or products within existing structures). In  
16 contrast, structural improvisation involves accomplishing a different task toward a different, new  
17 outcome. In so doing, it refers to radical innovations, such as redefining the mission or the business  
18 strategy.

19

### 20 *Resilient leadership*

21 Scholars agree that resilience is key to leadership (King and Rothstein, 2010). Given that leaders are  
22 expected to guide the team toward a purpose, to encourage the employee’s development, and instil a  
23 sense of engagement and commitment, their contribution to organisational performance is likely to be  
24 essential in times of crises. Hence, when confronted with failure or harsh conditions, leaders need to  
25 understand these contingencies and how to handle them. Their capacity to bounce back from adversity  
26 is vital to the organisation’s restart and future success. More importantly, by virtue of their ability,  
27 leaders can exert their influence over their followers, shaping their behaviours and influencing them  
28 toward the achievement of a certain goal (Dansereau et al., 2013), such as being resilient and recovering  
29 from jolts.

30 As resilience in general, resilient leadership cannot be imposed from the top or deterministically  
31 designed *ex ante* (Giustiniano et al., 2020). Moreover, the sheer presence of resilience (e.g. a resilient  
32 leader) does not necessarily imply its propagation (e.g. to the followers). As argued by Giustiniano et  
33 al. (2018), for resilience to escalate to higher levels of aggregation (e.g. from the individual to the teams),  
34 it must be expressed by individuals, conveyed towards the others *and* perceived by the receivers.  
35 Research suggests that resilient leaders can play a key role in spreading resilience: they are likely to  
36 respond to jolts through a process of adaptation and growth; that is, through a dynamic combination of  
37 divergent elements, such as “preparedness *and* improvisation, clear direction-setting *and* flexibility”

1 (Giustiniano et al., 2020, p. 2). Effective leaders are therefore strategic to the diffusion of resilience  
2 because they enable a process of ‘learning to unlearn and learn’ (Giustiniano et al., 2020), struggling to  
3 find a balance between reaction and adaptation, and transforming stressors and shocks into new energy.  
4 As in the case of Rudy Giuliani, the former mayor of New York City, who efficiently faced the 9/11  
5 attacks, resilient leaders can help their organisations to prosper despite adversities (James and Wooten,  
6 2010). Thanks to Giuliani’s leadership, even for a short time, the United States embraced New York  
7 City, for once forgetting about political differences and past grievances. Thus, given the inherent  
8 challenge of responding to crises with a command-and-control approach, fostering and nurturing  
9 resilience requires a strong will and ability of organisational leaders to develop new norms (James et al.,  
10 2011; Williams et al., 2017).

11 Similar to the other qualities that may be referred to individuals, teams and organisations (e.g. grit; see  
12 Rego et al., 2020), the synthesis between resilience and leadership is not immune from unexpected side  
13 effects. One side effect is the creation of an organisational culture that stigmatises individuals who are  
14 poor in resilience as flawed and faulty (the so called “shadow side to resilience”; Adler, 2013; Britt et  
15 al., 2016), leading to a sense of “citizenship fatigue” (Bolino et al., 2015). This can then inhibit the  
16 employee’s help seeking behaviours, repressing the dynamic learning process that underlies resilient  
17 leadership. Similarly, an extreme concern for resilience may induce people to become overly tolerant of  
18 adversity, such as accepting dangerous working conditions or toxic bosses (Giustiniano et al., 2018), as  
19 well as to lower their attention toward changing the environment to diminish their exposure to adversity  
20 (Eidelson, 2011; Krueger, 2011). Furthermore, individuals who strive to become too resilient might  
21 suffer from the “false hope syndrome” (Polivy and Herman, 2000): a phenomenon according to which,  
22 even where there is clear evidence that certain goals are unlikely to be achieved, overconfidence and  
23 overoptimism can lead individuals to waste energy and effort on meaningless tasks.

24 So far, the construct of resilient leadership has been found to be applicable to a variety of contexts, such  
25 as the healthcare sector (Kim and Windsor, 2015), military service (Mjelde et al., 2016), the management  
26 of natural disasters (Cohen et al., 2017), post-mergers and acquisitions integration (Cooke et al., 2020),  
27 and the hospitality industry (Haver et al., 2014). Nonetheless, the issue of how leaders exercise resilience  
28 remains underexplored empirically. Most of the studies on the theme have investigated the relationship  
29 between leadership styles and the follower’s resilience (Sommer et al., 2016; Harland et al., 2005), and  
30 the effect of a leader’s resilience on the employee’s work performance (Avey et al., 2011). Others have  
31 focused on single factors that are likely to foster a leader’s resilience (e.g. individual, situational, or  
32 behavioural factors; see Foerster and Ducheck, 2017). Therefore, given the inherent complexity  
33 distinguishing the concept of resilience, the leader’s ability to cope with adversity is likely to emerge as  
34 a result of a complex holistic process that, instead of a scattered collection of possible features, requires  
35 a more comprehensive understanding of how it unfolds in context and in relation (Giustiniano et al.,  
36 2020; Uhl-Bien et al., 2007).

37

## 1 **Research context**

2 The hospitality industry accounts for approximately 60% of the whole tourism industry in Italy (Mordor  
3 Intelligence, 2019). Until February 2020, it was yielding increasing revenues. This was also due to the  
4 more general expansion of the tourism industry in Italy, which in 2018 welcomed around 60 million  
5 tourists, recording a growth of 100 billion euro. In 2019, the contribution of tourism to the Italian GDP  
6 was estimated to be around 237 billion euros (13.3% of the overall GDP) and it was expected to reach  
7 14.3% in 10 years (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2020). In terms of hotels and available rooms,  
8 Italy is currently the first country in Europe and the fourth in the world with around 33 thousand hotels  
9 and 1 million rooms, behind only by the United States, China, and Japan (Ribaud and Franzese, 2019).  
10 Alongside this, new independent hotels, hotel chains, branded hotels have appeared throughout the  
11 country and the number of employees working for tourism and hospitality has increased dramatically:  
12 from 950 thousand employees in 2014 to 1.17 million in 2018 (Federazione delle Associazioni Italiane  
13 Alberghi e Turismo 2020).

14 This sector has been hit by COVID-19, as one could have never foreseen. The impact has been even  
15 more severe given that Italian hospitality relies strongly on international demand, which offsets domestic  
16 demand. While the latter has only slightly changed over the last 10 years, foreign customers have  
17 increased by 20% (Ribaud and Franzese, 2019), registering a rise of 15 million visitors between 2013  
18 and 2018 (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2020).

19 Due to the pandemic, as reported by Confturismo (the Italian tourism confederation), Italy lost about 30  
20 million tourists between March and May 2020<sup>2</sup>. In addition, the virus spread while hotels were preparing  
21 for the peak season, the Easter holiday, and the summertime. This led both tourists and corporate trips  
22 to cancel their reservations, even for September. Moreover, considering the variety of related businesses  
23 that depend on tourism (e.g. restaurants, shops, etc.), by the end of 2020 the total loss is expected to be  
24 around 200 billion euros, with a decrease of roughly 28.5 million tourist arrivals (Demoskopika, 2020)  
25 and catastrophic job losses, which are estimated at around 2.8 million. In particular, hotel and nonhotel  
26 accommodations are expected to experience the highest loss and their revenues might have decreased  
27 by 13 billion euros compared to the first semester of 2019 (17 billion euros).

28 Recent estimates from the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2020) calculate that there will be a  
29 rebound in tourism across Europe by the third quarter 2021; however, others expect it to occur only in  
30 2022. More importantly, they do not see a return to pre-pandemic 2019 levels happening before 2023.  
31 Another recent report by the Italian Tourism Agency (Agenzia Nazionale del Turismo, 2020) on  
32 international and domestic tourist arrivals in Italy 2020 to 2023 sees the worst scenario with a decrease  
33 of 69 million tourist arrivals in 2020, with the country needing to take a few years to recover. These  
34 predictions draw a tragic picture, especially for small establishments and businesses. The uncertainty

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<sup>2</sup> Compared to the same period of 2019, the loss is about 48 million tourist arrivals if considered between January and August 2020.

1 driving tourism all around the world and the underlying feeling that social distancing is likely to continue  
2 for some time ultimately leads to severe consequences for the whole economy: the prices for travelling  
3 will tend to increase; this will produce a strict selection among tourists who can afford vacations and  
4 leisure time, which causes the closure of a significant number of small business working in tourism.  
5 Considering the long-term implications of the crisis for the whole industry, many countries are  
6 emphasising the need to build a more resilient and sustainable tourism economy. The outbreak of  
7 COVID-19 thus must become an opportunity to rethink tourism for the future, where building resilience  
8 and benefitting from the leadership of resilient individuals might provide a critical contribution for a  
9 faster recovery.

10 Based on this, we consider the Italian hospitality industry to be highly suitable to investigate the way in  
11 which hospitality managers are trying to improvise resilience to cope with the shock produced by  
12 COVID-19 pandemic. In the following section, we will present the qualitative research that we  
13 conducted to explore this issue.

14

## 15 **Methodology**

### 16 *Research design*

17 Given the need to collect unique insights on an extraordinary phenomenon (i.e. the COVID-19  
18 pandemic) and its shocking consequences for the Italian hospitality sector, this study has adopted a  
19 qualitative research method. As advocated by scholars (e.g. Kozinets, 2010), qualitative research aims  
20 to explore a complex set of factors regarding a central phenomenon to depict the varied views or  
21 meanings held by the actors experiencing such a phenomenon. In so doing, it provides the basis for  
22 understanding new theories that might help to explain the phenomenon, letting new and inspiring  
23 perspectives emerge.

24

### 25 *Respondents and data collection*

26 To investigate hospitality resilience, exploratory interviews with hotel managers and general managers  
27 working in the tourism industry in Italy were conducted. Following Corbin and Strauss (2014), we  
28 continued collecting data until we judged that theoretical saturation was reached. In particular, after the  
29 11<sup>th</sup> interview, 80% of the categories were identified. We therefore continued data collection for three  
30 more interviews, which helped to detect 90% of the categories. We then conducted three additional  
31 interviews and found that they helped to generate the remaining 10% of the categories. However, one  
32 last interview was added to ensure that data saturation was achieved. Thus, after 18 interviews no  
33 incremental benefit was brought, so it was deemed that the data collection had reached saturation point.  
34 Due to the very short time window available, and the need to gather thoughts and opinions exactly during  
35 the crisis caused by COVID-19, all of the interviews were conducted over a three-week period between

1 May and June 2020<sup>3</sup>. For the purpose of this study, a combination of convenience and purposive  
2 sampling was used (Marshall, 1996). First, through convenience sampling, hotel managers who were in  
3 the personal network of the principal investigator of this study were contacted. Next, snowball sampling  
4 allowed us to involve further participants through recommendations provided by the recruited  
5 interviewees. Second, to increase the representation of the sample selected, purposive sampling was  
6 applied (Wan and Chan, 2013). In particular, LinkedIn helped the researchers to identify additional hotel  
7 managers by searching for contacts who reported “hotel manager” or “general manager of hotel xxx” in  
8 their profile.

9 Before participating in the interview, each respondent was informed about the purpose of the study and  
10 its exploratory nature. We also asked for their permission to tape the interview, ensuring that the data  
11 collected was for research purposes only.

12 Two main issues required to involve hotel managers working in different cities and towns in Italy (in  
13 the North, in the Centre, and in the South). First, some Italian cities (i.e. Milan) were hit harder by the  
14 COVID-19 than others. The inclusion of respondents leading hotels in different regions and cities  
15 allowed us to capture the heterogeneity in their perception of the shock and the consequent actions that  
16 they took. Second, consistently with the different ways in which the virus spread across the country,  
17 both the lockdown restrictions and the decisions regarding the reopening taken by the regional presidents  
18 differed across regions. For instance, rules that applied in Lombardy (one of the Northern regions) were  
19 much stricter than those imposed in Calabria (one of the Southern regions)<sup>4</sup>. This might have influenced  
20 the way in which their leaders tried to cope with the crisis by COVID-19.

21 Table 1 shows the demographics of the interviewees. Reflecting the gender imbalance that distinguishes  
22 hospitality (Pinar et al., 2011), there were 3 women and 15 men. Eight of them were between 50-59  
23 years old, other eight were between 40-49 years old (47%) and the remaining two were between 60 and  
24 69 years old. To include different hotel types, we involved city hotels, resorts, relais and chateau, beach  
25 hotels and country hotels. Regarding the hotel ratings, Table 1 shows that our sample includes hotels  
26 from 3 to 5 luxury stars.

27

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<sup>3</sup> Note for editors and reviewers: this study was deliberately conceived for the *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, Special issue on “The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the World’s Hospitality Industry”. Hence, the limited duration of the call for paper bounded both data collection and data analysis.

<sup>4</sup> Lombardy was the region worst hit by the COVID-19 emergency that has had the toughest rules in place.

Code	Gender	Age	Hotel type	Hotel rating	Position
01	Male	50-59	Resort	4-star	General Manager
02	Male	60-69	City hotel	5*-star	General Manager
03	Male	50-59	Beach hotel	4-star	Hotel Manager
04	Male	40-49	Beach hotel	3-star	Hotel Owner and Manager
05	Male	40-49	City hotel	4-star	Hotel Manager
06	Female	40-49	City hotel	4-star	Hotel Manager
07	Male	50-59	City hotel	3-star	General Manager
08	Male	40-49	City hotel	4-star	Hotel Manager
09	Male	60-69	City hotel	5-star	General Manager
10	Male	50-59	Resort	4-star	General Manager
11	Female	50-59	Relais&Chateau	4-star	Resident Manager
12	Male	50-59	City hotel	4-star	Hotel Manager
13	Male	40-49	City hotel	4-star	Hotel Owner and Manager
14	Male	40-49	Resort	4-star	General Manager
15	Male	50-59	City hotel	3-star	Hotel Manager
16	Male	50-59	Resort	4-star	General Manager
17	Female	40-49	Country hotel	4-star	General Manager
18	Male	40-49	Relais&Chateau	5-star	General Manager

1

2 **Table 1**

3 The profile of the interviewees

4

5

6 *Interviews*

7 Given the travel restrictions imposed by the pandemic, the interviews were conducted by phone (15)  
8 and videocalls (3). All of them were taped and lasted approximately 30 minutes. No incentive was given  
9 to any of the respondents for taking part in the study. Consistently with her expertise in running research  
10 in tourism, only one of the co-authors conducted all interviews.

11 Following the aim of the research to explore a completely new issue (i.e. hotel managers' resilience  
12 during COVID-19), we decided to investigate the field by using in-depth, exploratory interviews  
13 (Packer, 2017) that allowed the respondents to address the subject freely by narrating incidents to  
14 support and enrich their answers. For the sake of high rigour, the answers that we collected during early  
15 interviews were useful to refine the protocol for the subsequent interviews (Eisenhardt and Graebner,  
16 2007). The protocol was built around four main issues that were found to be key to explore the way in  
17 which leaders improvise responses and practice resilience. The first referred to the way in which leaders  
18 conceive resilience; that is, the way they interpret their role of change agents, of key individuals whose  
19 actions are fundamental in times of crisis. While investigating this issue, we aimed to understand

1 whether participants conceived resilience, mostly either in its adaptive or reactive form (see Giustiniano  
2 et al., 2018). Even though they might appear as diverging perspectives, we acknowledge that resilience  
3 can be more effectively conceptualised as resulting from the dynamic interplay between these two  
4 forces. Furthermore, the first issue attempted to uncover the potential antecedents of individual  
5 resilience, both at the individual and at the contextual level. The second issue that we considered relevant  
6 to this study was the goals that the leaders set to cope with a shock, including the way in which they  
7 make decisions when presented with the need to solve a crisis. This issue recalled the analysis of the  
8 dominant approach followed by the leader when trying to bounce back from a jolt, such as an  
9 engineering approach (i.e. returning to the normal state after the disturbance has been handled; Holling,  
10 1996) instead of an innovation-oriented approach (i.e. significantly revising internal procedures and  
11 ways of working). Furthermore, it directed attention toward the extent to which individuals improvise  
12 actions and decisions while practicing resilience. The third issue pointed to the way in which the leaders  
13 might perceive the crisis as a unique learning opportunity, a valuable chance to change the status quo  
14 and to enrich competences. In this regard, the literature on learning from failures (e.g. Baumard and  
15 Starbuck, 2005; Carmeli and Gittel, 2009) clearly posits that crises might bring exceptional opportunities  
16 to learn. More importantly, resilience might entail a process of ‘learning to learn’ (Andersen, 2016;  
17 Giustiniano et al., 2018, 2020), thus requiring a completely new experimentation approach. Therefore,  
18 this issue called for an investigation of the leader’s optimism, hope, and positive outlook. Finally, the  
19 topic required us to examine whether and how the leaders contribute to the diffusion of resilience  
20 throughout the organisation. Acknowledging that resilience can be nurtured and spread within an  
21 organisational setting (Giustiniano et al., 2018), we aimed to capture what actions were put in place to  
22 allow resilience to proliferate. It has previously been shown that building positive interactions, being  
23 effectively connected to the external environment, and placing emphasis on self-organisation and a  
24 culture of ‘learnability’ (Garud et al., 2006) may be critical to let resilience diffuse.

25 The questions guiding the interviews were as follows:

- 26 1) “What does it mean to you to cope with the consequences of COVID-19?”
- 27 2) “While coping with those consequences, what goal(s) did you set for your hotel?”
- 28 3) “How do you think this crisis can be seen as an opportunity to learn, both for you as a hospitality  
29 professional and for the tourism industry?”
- 30 4) “How did you try to spread your approach to the crisis to your staff?”

31 Depending upon the participant’s answers, additional open-ended questions were posed to elucidate the  
32 issue. The interviewer only asked the second, third, and fourth questions when the respondent had  
33 nothing else to add or say about the previous issue. At the end of every interview, each participant was  
34 given the opportunity to comment on issues other than those addressed by the pre-set, open-ended  
35 questions. At this stage, the interviewer thanked the respondent and ended the interview. During the  
36 interview, the interviewer took detailed notes, highlighting any keywords the respondent mentioned  
37 more than once.

1 All of the interviews were conducted in Italian and transcribed and translated into English for data  
2 analysis. Although all of interviews could have been conducted in English (all of the respondents were  
3 highly fluent in English), using Italian made it easier for both the interviewer and the participants to  
4 freely express their opinions on the topic.

5

#### 6 *Data analysis*

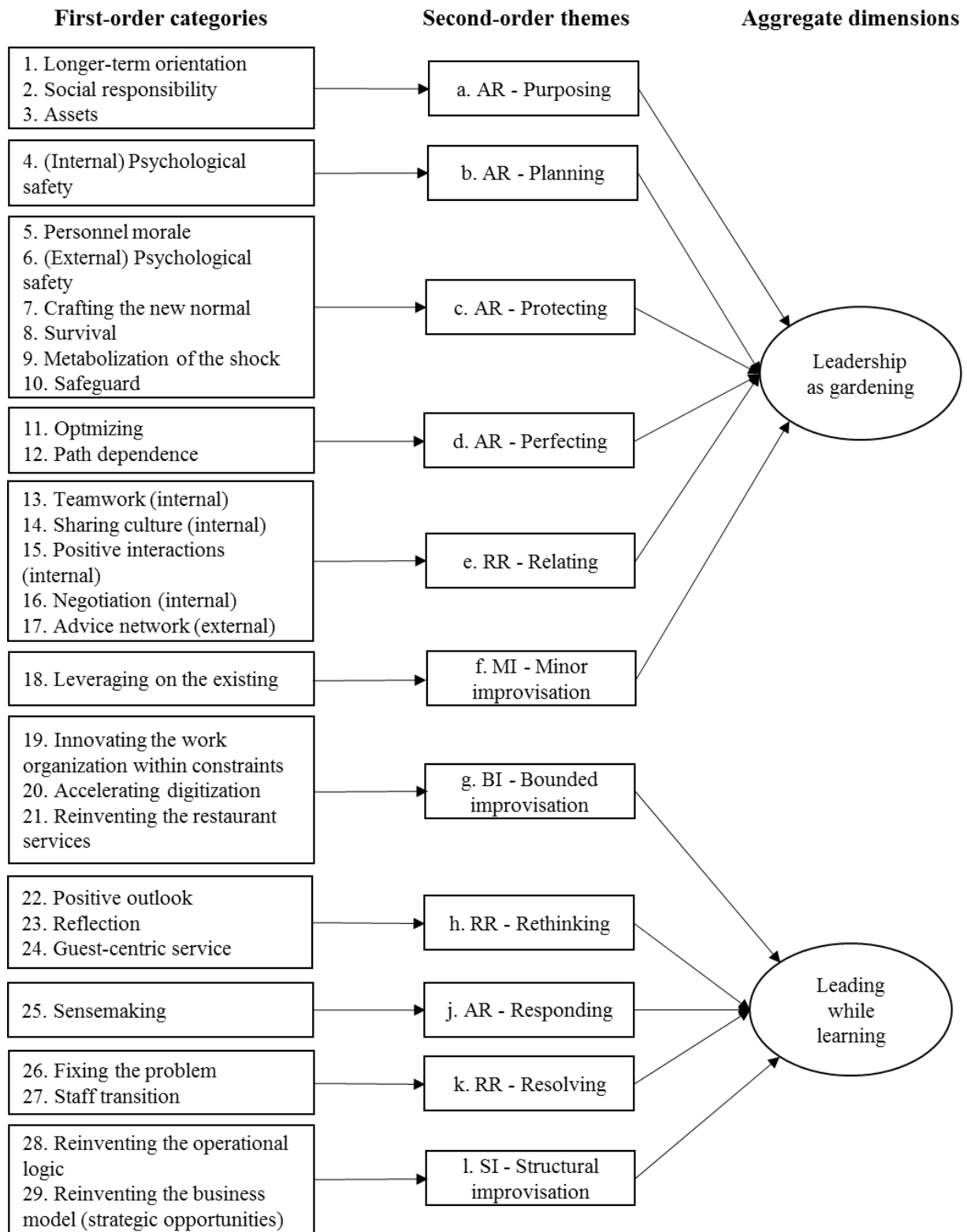
7 To explore the phenomenon, we followed conventional recommendations for inductive qualitative  
8 analysis (Gioia et al., 2013). In particular, we performed a qualitative content analysis (Schreier, 2012),  
9 which is found to be suitable when researchers attempt to make systematic and replicable inferences  
10 from texts to the research contexts (Maxwell, 2012; Wan and Chan, 2013). This allows to subjectively  
11 interpret the content of those texts through a systematic classification process (Hsieh and Shannon,  
12 2005). By applying a content analysis, researchers tend to depict connections between categories and  
13 themes, increasing their ability to come up with a broad and condensed description of a particular  
14 phenomenon (Mak et al., 2010).

15 Following prior research (Kao et al., 2016; Tracey and Phillips, 2016), the analysis implemented in this  
16 study involved three steps. First, we collected all materials by transcribing all interviews within a  
17 database. Then, in line with Strauss and Corbin (1990), and Gioia et al. (2013), to identify emerging and  
18 relevant themes, one co-author (who has been working in hospitality and tourism for a few years before  
19 joining academia) went through the data using an open-coding process by reading the transcriptions  
20 carefully line by line several times until she detected meaningful units. The segmentation of the material  
21 (i.e. the act of dividing it into units) followed a thematic criterion. As suggested by Schreier (2012), this  
22 is by far more effective than the formal criterion because it tends to ensure a better fit between each  
23 coding unit and the coding frame. Consistent with Kao et al. (2016), coding units with similar meanings  
24 were sorted into the same theme. In case a coding unit was considered to be unconnected to the already  
25 identified themes, it was treated as a new theme. In doing so, initial concepts were inductively detected  
26 and grouped into first-order categories, while always trying to retain the language used by the  
27 participants. The third step required us to perform an axial coding through which first-order categories  
28 are examined to seek similarities and differences among them using both inductive and deductive  
29 thinking (Corbin and Strauss, 2014; Gioia et al., 2013; Tracey and Phillips, 2016). The aim was to reduce  
30 the relevant categories to a manageable number and to relate them to a group of second-order themes.  
31 This stage led us to iteratively move between the data and the relevant literature (Eisenhardt, 1989; Gioia  
32 et al., 2013), having the framework of “resilience as practice” developed by Giustiniano et al. (2018) as  
33 a hook to the theory realm. Afterwards, all of the identified themes were labelled and examined once  
34 again to make sure they correctly reflected the domain of hospitality leaders’ resilience. Through this  
35 process, 29 first-order categories were classified into 11 second-order themes.

36 The member checking technique was used to support the trustworthiness of our data (Nag et al., 2007).  
37 Once completed, we returned the very first draft of the analysis to the interviewees and we asked them

1 for any feedback. More specifically, we invited them to indicate: (i) whether the overall results were  
2 consistent with their expectations and reflect their experiences, and (ii) whether they disagree with some  
3 of the findings. All of the participants confirmed the accuracy of the results and sent a few inputs that  
4 led us to slightly revise the coding structure.

5 The resulting final data structure is illustrated in Figure 1, which shows the categories and the themes  
6 underlying our findings and the relationships between them. Further supporting evidence for our results  
7 is reported in Table 2.



1  
2

**Figure 1**

Final coding structure

(AR=Adaptive resilience; RR=Reactive resilience; MI=Minor improvisation; BI=Bounded improvisation; SI=Structural improvisation)

Second-order themes	First-order categories	Representative data
<i>Aggregate dimension: Leadership as gardening</i>		
a. AR - Purposing	1. Longer-term orientation	"We need a territorial marketing plan, that lifts the destination up again."; "It's time to think of a sustainable tourism development plan."
	2. Social responsibility	"A further purpose is the ethical and social one because we take care of our employees' families."; "I know this year I will not make any profit, but I aim to guarantee my employees their job."
	3. Assets	"I know I am in a privileged situation because I didn't have to manage serious cash flow issues."; "Everything was supported by the owner's ability to invest because nobody can afford it."
b. AR – Planning	4. (Internal) Psychological safety	"...Always trying to take stock of the situation realistically."; "We need to prepare ourselves not only by analysing and forecasting, but also reading the curves of the pandemic."
c. AR – Protecting	5. Personnel morale	"In this situation, it's fundamental to keep morale high, work on people's psychology, create an atmosphere of serenity, give hope."; "I tried to keep the spirit of the collaborators up because they were in trouble [...] It was about giving them the serenity they needed at that moment."
	6. (External) Psychological safety	"The customer must be reassured above all."; "We have to make sure that people who visited us in the past come back in complete safety."
	7. Crafting the new normal	"The goal is to return to our normality which was made up of incessant rhythms, moments of hard work."; "Our challenge is to try to apply the new rules, the new protocols in the most transparent way possible to regain possession of the previous mode (we worked before)."
	8. Survival	"The goal is to reopen, which is not secondary, but is an important goal."; "The main challenge is to keep the company going. So, try to survive."
	9. Metabolisation of the shock	"It is a tragic moment because there is no precedent, no one has a solution, or a past to lean on."; "No one could ever have thought this could happen. So the shock was huge."
	10. Safeguard	"We must be careful at this stage of transition regarding how far we go forward. I wouldn't like to make investments with no return... we need to carefully evaluate the decisions to make."; "We are in the corner, we must defend ourselves."
	11. Optimising	"(We had) to manage (the hotel) on the basis of what we had [...] with energy savings, efficiency, optimising the workforce, reorganising resources."; "One always tries to optimise all costs [...] I tried to save money."
d. AR – Perfecting	12. Path dependence	"Those who have sown well have a much better chance of overcoming this difficult time."; "It also depends on how one has worked in the past 10 years."
e. RR – Relating	13. Teamwork (internal)	"I decided to build an extended team of people, from every department, because even through a simple brainstorming, ideas could come out and could help overcome the moment."; "We must tighten the

		collaboration with the administrative and commercial staff.”
	14. Sharing culture (internal)	“I’ve always had a very transparent relationship with my employees.”; “I am used to explaining everything... for me the most important thing is to be transparent with them and communicate regularly.”
	15. Positive interactions (internal)	“There was everyone’s support, a clear spirit of participation.”; “To keep people together, we organised an English course, a sommelier course. So we tried to maintain the team together.”
	16. Negotiation (internal)	“I struggle to explain (to the owners) that they no longer have to think as they used to think months ago. It is the most difficult part ever.”; “The board had certainties that were completely reversed by the relationship with the customers we had on site. And this caused stress because transmitting (the board) this information is not always easy.”
	17. Advice network (external)	“I absolutely needed to confront myself with someone else.”; “We often talk to colleagues to know more about how bookings were evolving.”
f. MI - Minor improvisation	18. Leveraging on the existing	“We are more or less settling on a rate, on a pricing idea, which will not be based on revenues, but on cancellation policy.”; “I think of some concessions to make to the customer, some benefits. I think, for instance, of something to give in the spa, the cocktail at the pool bar, room service.”
<i>Aggregate dimension: Leading while learning</i>		
g. BI - Bounded improvisation	19. Innovating the work organisation within constraints	“We all have to be creative, we all try to think about what the best solution for sanitising spaces can be.”; “(We had to) improvise the hotel closure. I had never done it.”
	20. Accelerating digitisation	“We must introduce different operating modes, with a push on technology and digitisation, but we don’t want to push it too much because we would lose what our hospitality was.”; “... An acceleration of digitisation. The tools were already there, but it was the customers who were late because they didn’t feel like undergoing digitisation. Moreover, ...the development of contactless in general and vocal services. So take a step into a slightly more digital era.”
	21. Reinventing the restaurant services	“For example, we had a huge buffet also with typical products... That will have to be completely revised. In practical terms, this means that guests will no longer be able to directly access the buffet, so it must be rethought trying not to take a step back, but maintaining the past service standards, despite what we offer changes.”; “[...] The menu at the restaurant... One may think that it is easy to switch to the digital menu. Easy for those who may be aged within 60 years. For older people it will not be easy to say ‘look, the menu is here on the I-pad’ but we cannot deliver the I-pad to him, he must read it from our hands or we send it to his mobile phone and he can consult it from there. Even these little changes, which might seem irrelevant, can actually make older guests waver, especially those who are used to travel all around the world for 70 years. And there

h. RR – Rethinking	22. Positive outlook	lies the difficulty of our professionalism in trying to cushion the change.” “(It was important) to make it clear that this is only a negative, difficult, very difficult parenthesis.”; “We knew it was temporary. It would all end forever. This difficult moment would have been over soon and we would have opened again the hotel.”
	23. Reflection	“(This crisis) also gave many people the opportunity to think a little about themselves, look a little inside themselves.”; “People have discovered their professional frailty.”
	24. Guest-centric service	“The customer doesn’t have to be a room number any longer... he’s someone to take care of.”; “It is necessary to shorten the distance between the hotel and the customer and take better care of the relationship with the customer.”
j. AR – Responding	25. Sensemaking	“It was important to focus only on reliable and relevant information.”; “In this mass of information and events, companies no longer have certainties.”
k. RR – Resolving	26. Fixing the problem	“(We need to) try to find solutions [...] In order, to understand what it would have been and how we could place ourselves as a company in this new scenario.”; “We have to find solutions.”
	27. Staff transition	“I realise the effort that the staff will have to make at the opening, because they are no longer used to such frequent telephone contact with the customer.”; “The staff must be trained or re-trained. Especially for the younger ones it’s completely new.”
l. SI - Structural improvisation	28. Reinventing the operational logic	“We have to completely change our mentality, first for ourselves (the manager) and then for our collaborators [...] if we want to be successful, we must change our mentality of operating.”; “We must change our way of thinking, find a new way to manage the procedures and the various hotel departments.”
	29. Reinventing the business model (strategic opportunities)	“Stop using the tools we used up to now to look at the market trends... the forecasts, all business intelligence indices. Now we have to respond with instinct and speed, go straight, you have to give something [...] we will do things differently or cancel what has been done so far and do them in a completely new way.”; “There will be different innovations. The way of selling products must change.”

1  
2 **Table 2**  
3 Representative data for each theme/category  
4 (AR=Adaptive resilience; RR=Reactive resilience; MI=Minor improvisation; BI=Bounded  
5 improvisation; SI=Structural improvisation)  
6  
7  
8  
9  
10

## 1 **Findings**

2 The refinement of the data analysis via the filters of the second-order themes allowed us to identify two  
3 major overarching dimensions: leadership as gardening and leading while learning. These dimensions  
4 are presented in more detail below, together with the quotes supporting their emergence.

5

### 6 *Leadership as gardening*

7 The first finding reveals the importance for hospitality managers to lead the transition through the crisis  
8 as gardeners, who are able to nurture the organisation to grow smart autonomous assets. The idea  
9 matches the intuition by McChristal et al. (2015) by which gardener's job is to create an environment in  
10 which plants can flourish; that is, to keep the garden well organised and adequately maintained, in such  
11 a way that plants can grow individually, all at the same time<sup>5</sup>.

12 Our gardening metaphor is conceptually anchored in features of organisational resilience, such as  
13 purposing, planning, protecting, perfecting, and relating (second-order themes, see Fig. 1; ref.  
14 Giustiniano et al., 2018). It also takes place within the domain of minor improvisation (ref. Hadida et  
15 al., 2015). Together, these indicate that the hospitality leaders in our sample were trying to cope with  
16 the shock caused by the pandemic by creating the appropriate contextual conditions able to support the  
17 ability to overcome the crisis. Hence, in complex and dynamic environments, such as those that  
18 hospitality managers are facing due to the COVID-19, leaders tend to deploy decision making  
19 responsibility at all levels of their organisation. Like gardeners, they invest their time and resources to  
20 create a work environment where things (and people) take root and are allowed to grow on their own.  
21 They need to be able to zoom out and observe the organisation from a distance, knowing that resilience  
22 is nurtured before the crisis and is deployed as the crisis unfolds.

23 Considering leadership as gardening thus places an emphasis on elements such as order, stability,  
24 predictability, and improvement. Italian hospitality leaders were found to act like gardeners, looking at  
25 their organisational outcomes as less dependent on the initial planting than on consistent maintenance.  
26 Their attempts to improve, to protect, and to make the organisation stable and safe are determinant to  
27 success. The idea underlying this perspective is that leaders cannot grow people and organisation; rather,  
28 they can only make their best to cultivate a work environment through which people and organisations  
29 are allowed to grow.

30 Stability and improvement come with taking responsibility for the whole organisation. This is also the  
31 case for gardeners who are responsible for the whole garden and, as such, have to make sure that all of

---

<sup>5</sup> The expression is freely inspired by the book of McChristal et al. (2015, p. 232) which reads "The temptation to lead as a chess master, controlling each move of the organization, must give way to an approach as a gardener, enabling rather than directing. A gardening approach to leadership is anything but passive. The leader acts as an 'Eyes-On, Hands-Off' enabler who creates and maintains an ecosystem in which the organization operates." That also matches the former Zappos' CEO Tony Hsieh's consideration of the organization as a "... greenhouse with lots of plants, and each plant represents an employee [... and the CEO being] the architect of the greenhouse [...] to help figure out the right conditions within the greenhouse to enable all of the other plants to flourish and thrive." (quote reported in Giustiniano et al., 2018, p. 118).

1 the plants are harmoniously related with each other to contribute to the beauty and health of the whole  
2 garden. One informant reported that she felt the entire responsibility for her staff and the possible  
3 difficulty that some of them may experience when trying to get the unemployment benefits provided by  
4 the government as a consequence of the pandemic. She reported her sense of responsibility and  
5 protection as follows:

6

7 I have been constantly sending messages to my employees, especially for this unemployment  
8 insurance that was so late to come [...] I know the situation of every individual who works with  
9 me [...] We have an external cleaning company that has always worked with us. So, I was really  
10 worried that they could pay wages regularly [to their employees who work with us]. I was  
11 concerned that my staff had done the application to get the insurance. I took responsibility for  
12 this too and this gave me a lot of stress. I wanted them to be protected.

13

14 Therefore, rather than considering change and innovation as the only options available, gardeners tend  
15 to also protect their organisation from the temptation to make significant revisions to the existing  
16 procedures and ways of doing the job. Leaders as gardeners move step-by-step in managing change,  
17 leaving open the possibility to step back. As in gardening, in reorganisation processes accomplishment  
18 is slow and reorganisation itself is not an episodic act but a process, a continuing job whose results will  
19 largely accrue to one's successors. The leader's approach to the crisis therefore goes through an  
20 incremental change process that requires constant attention to maintain the most appropriate conditions  
21 able to allow the organisation to survive and eventually succeed. The following statements from two of  
22 the interviewees support this idea:

23

24 I don't have any further energy to think where to go. I wouldn't want to make fast investments  
25 and decisions and then find out that the market requires me something else.

26

27 Now I am a little contained. I say, 'ok, let's get to do this and then we'll try to rebuild, step-by-  
28 step'.

29

30 A key message from the interviews is that one of the most critical factors that help leaders to provide  
31 the effective conditions to be resilient is to lead their organisations by example. In this case, they were  
32 trying to become a role model for their subordinates. Even if the staff was highly receptive in what their  
33 bosses said, for instance during the video calls and on-line meetings, they were far more alert in  
34 intercepting the behavioural signals coming from the leader. Thus, the leader's most powerful  
35 communication tool was her own behaviour. In this regard, consider the following quotations from two  
36 hotel managers:

37

1 It's like the commander of a ship. At this moment, those leading the ship better not show their  
2 weaknesses, rather show themselves more firmly at the wheel.

3  
4 I start working at nine in the morning and go to bed at midnight [...] I will be a man among men.

5  
6 Overall, this idea recalls the gardener's attention toward the entire organisation, the team, and its  
7 cohesion. Recognising that power is diffused and shared within the organisation, the main mantra  
8 becomes 'we have a problem that only we can understand and solve'. Leaders can practice their  
9 resilience by working together and involving the staff in attempting to face the crisis all together. Hence,  
10 resilient leadership results from people finding support in each other. The following quote shows the  
11 way in which one interviewee described this collective sense:

12  
13 It's a big family and this has been evident [...] yesterday the maître brought me a reservation  
14 [...] we perceived that we were all on the same boat [...] These are all things that came  
15 spontaneously. When I phoned each of them to say that we were closing, I thought they treated  
16 me badly, and instead they all understood.

17  
18 In summary, our interviews indicated that resilient leadership shifts the focus from the leader to the  
19 organisation. Hence, to cope with the consequences of COVID-19, leaders should firstly understand the  
20 unique environment around them (both the organisational one and the external one) because what works  
21 for one Italian hotel might not work for another one, or might even lead to failure of hotels interacting  
22 with different environments. Second, they should respond to a shock accordingly, opting for solutions  
23 that are consistent with the context they are embedded with. This suggests that, instead of invoking  
24 universal principles, hospitality managers face a crisis by adapting their leadership to the unique  
25 environment of their organisation. Therefore, what matters is the whole garden, not the gardener, and  
26 the need to bend and not to break, transforming and using knowledge for adaptive goals.

### 27 28 *Leading while learning*

29 The second key finding emerging from our analysis is the ability of the hospitality managers to look at  
30 the pandemic as an opportunity to learn something new and to look at the jolt as a chance to grow, to  
31 acquire new knowledge, and enrich their competences. This aggregate dimension is anchored in features  
32 of organisational resilience such as rethinking, responding, and resolving (second-order themes, see Fig.  
33 1; ref. Giustiniano et al., 2018). Leading while learning may unfold both as bounded and structural  
34 improvisation (Hadida et al., 2015). In this case the leader is a participant in the process of resilience,  
35 learning and responding as the crisis unfolds, reinventing the business model and the operational logic  
36 in an impromptu way. Our evidence thus adds to existing work by showing that improvisation involves

1 both extraordinary and infra-ordinary improvisations (Cunha and Clegg, 2019). These two modes are  
2 critical for learning to unfold. The following quotes underline the idea that leading the organisation in  
3 times of crisis is seen as something helpful and constructive:

4  
5 We can look a little further... trying to make the most of the situation.  
6

7 The restart is a moment of new life, an injection of confidence for the people who work in the  
8 hotel, for the guests and for those who lead the hotel. It's always a new moment.  
9

10 The learning opportunity resulting from the crisis also recalled the opportunity to dig more deeply into  
11 the organisation to get to know it better and do what the daily routine does not usually allow to do. This  
12 requires revising, enriching, and questioning one's approach to managing the organisation. Hence,  
13 especially in peak season, hospitality leaders are deeply immersed in their silos. They have no time to  
14 consider apparently less relevant managerial and organisational issues that might be critical to the hotel's  
15 performance. Practicing resilient leadership thus calls for more attention toward reconsidering how work  
16 was conducted before the crisis. For example, two informants commented that:

17  
18 We have opportunities for improvement... For instance, at this moment, I know every type of  
19 cost and anything else [...] In my case, the financial knowledge of the company has grown,  
20 which is an important part. I tend more to do the operational part with customers, with the staff...  
21 The numbers are those that I am happy to delegate because it is the one I like least, but it was a  
22 positive factor because it helped me take the big picture of the company in this moment [...] I  
23 do hope that this 'mental crisis' will remain, so as not to fall back into one's comfort zone... one  
24 then falls into habits.  
25

26 It was also an opportunity to examine the company even better and give it a more in-depth  
27 internal re-reading, because when everything is fine one is so busy that [...] you say 'this has  
28 always been working'.  
29

30 In our data we found powerful evidence that the participants seemed to face the crisis by being open  
31 toward challenging the status quo, rethinking the way of doing the job, of offering their service or selling  
32 their products. In particular, they told us they should be willing to correct the mistakes made in the past,  
33 to take the time to renovate their managerial skills, and to pose greater emphasis on services that should  
34 be primary but which have been moved to the background over the years. This idea was shared by some  
35 of our respondents:  
36

1 I took it as a challenge. In my opinion, moments of crisis can open up new possibilities. They  
2 make you better and make you understand where you went wrong in many years and in many  
3 details and change.

4  
5 Great attention returns to services that we took for granted (such as cleaning), which were valued  
6 very little before, but which had to be fundamental even then. Sometimes we lose our bearings  
7 because we are focused so much on other things, I don't know... being social, posting videos  
8 everywhere and you end up neglecting the cleanliness, the welcome, the smile.

9  
10 The participants described a variety of explorative directions that they intend to pursue as a consequence  
11 of the shock caused by COVID-19. Some of them pointed to entering into new markets that have so far  
12 been neglected or overlooked; others referred to the need to make a shift in the way they conceive their  
13 job. Overall, this demonstrates that these leaders also think about crises as an opportunity to make a  
14 change, to revisit their organisation, their strategies, and their mindset. As reported by some of the  
15 informants involved in this study:

16  
17 All our offers have been reformulated to meet the domestic market [...] This is an opportunity  
18 for many of us to say 'ok, I can change, I can get back on the market, I can do other things', to  
19 say 'ok, we have always served a demand which is 90% American and suddenly everything  
20 collapses... maybe this is the time to become a little more domestic, to stop working easy, to put  
21 ourselves in the game.

22  
23 Here is the ability to completely redesign the service. For example, the breakfast buffet. The  
24 drama of not being able to have a buffet anymore. This was key to us. It was really our strength.  
25 Now it completely fails. We must find another key resource, we must work hard to find it. It is  
26 useless to persist on an element that is missing. The big difficulty is elasticity [...] I make some  
27 reasoning and then I stop and I say to myself 'be careful that you are reasoning as you have  
28 reasoned so far'.

29  
30 We need to make an effort to hear what the customers have to say, their perceptions and  
31 understand what they want to hear. Make an effort to jump to the other side of the fence. So  
32 staying on the front line to understand their needs [...] Through the 'wind' of the guest, the  
33 manager must learn.

34  
35 Leading while learning thus emerged as a key feature characterising resilient leadership: exercising  
36 resilience entails to learn from setbacks, to be able to be open toward new possibilities, new options, both

1 for the leaders themselves and for the organisation. A higher learning capacity helps a leader to cope better  
2 with adversities and recover more quickly, facilitating the effective handling of difficulties.

#### 4 **Discussion**

##### 5 *Contribution to theory*

6 The main findings emerging from the analysis respond to our research question on how hospitality  
7 leaders improvised resilience in practice while facing the shock caused by COVID-19. The components  
8 of resilient leadership that we identified offer a contribution to the extant literature on leadership,  
9 resilience, and improvisation. Furthermore, we believe that our findings confirm that resilient leadership  
10 shows some paradoxical aspects, as anticipated by conceptual intuition of Giustiniano et al. (2020), and  
11 therefore we can also offer a contribution to that research.

12 First, we found empirical grounds to the insight formulated by McChrystal et al. (2015) that leadership  
13 can be interpreted as gardening. Nonetheless, such a component per se appears to be insufficient for  
14 achieving resilience if not complemented by the emphasis and openness on learning. Furthermore,  
15 leadership as gardening and leading while learning appears to be two conceptual propagations that  
16 complete the dialectic interpretation of resilience as formulated by Giustiniano et al. (2018). To this  
17 extent, these two components act as intertwined rather than standing in isolation.

18 The interdependence between gardening and learning led to our second contribution. We discovered  
19 that resilient leadership is a process with a notorious paradoxical nature (Giustiniano et al., 2020). It is  
20 rich in tensions and these tensions (rationality vs. empathy, protecting the mission vs. exploration, being  
21 conservative vs. foresight) are necessary to navigate the crisis. We found that leaders need to be able to  
22 represent themselves as being *in the system* and *outside the system* to be able to empathise and keep an  
23 emotional distance, to improvise a move as they plan the next move. What is revealing here for theory  
24 is the fact that resilient leadership implies a combination of paradoxical actions, involving a paradoxical  
25 capability: the capacity to maintain normal functioning in extraordinary times.

26 Improvisation is a third important contribution. Resilient leadership is an improvised act. As indicated  
27 by scholars, improvisation is not strictly responsive but it rather implies preparation (Ciuchta et al.,  
28 2021; Cunha et al., 1999). We expanded improvisation theory by showing that in times of crisis, leaders  
29 improvise solutions that build resilience that feeds back on the capacity to conduct further  
30 improvisations. Our findings show that the combination of the care for the organisation (gardening) and  
31 the adoption of learning as an attitude helps organisations and their leaders to avoid unwanted  
32 consequences, such as the ones identified by prior studies (e.g. Batista et al., 2016; Giustiniano et al.,  
33 2016) as the “dark side” of organisational improvisation. **We therefore presented improvisation and  
34 resilience as deeply engaged and fuelling one another, indicating that improvisation is more than  
35 episodic responding to specific events, a process entangled with other processes, with both reactive and  
36 adaptive features (Abrantes et al., 2018; Cunha et al., 2014).**

1 Our fourth contribution is offered to the paradox theory because we revealed that resilient leadership  
2 implies a combination of paradoxical actions. In fact, the nurturing of resilience requires a paradoxical  
3 capacity to understand that leaders must be able to *prepare* themselves to create an organisational garden  
4 in which operational efficiency may be replaced by improvisational capacity. Resilience implies the  
5 capacity to respond to challenges in a way that is cultivated in a long-term orientation and a capacity to  
6 respond to issues that requires immediate mobilisation and ad-hoc action. Our data suggest that resilient  
7 leadership is not about preparing the long term or responding to the short term, but it is about both: it is  
8 about planning and dropping one's plans in face of "vu jade" types of situations (Weick, 1993). To this  
9 extent, our findings testify that when the either/or problem framing offered by traditional trade-offs  
10 approach weakens or fails, the both/and (Smith et al., 2016) paradoxical acceptance of reality is the only  
11 option to be pursued. The paradoxical competency of resilient leadership in this case involved the  
12 activation of opposites that were imposed by the situation. Improvisation and paradoxical choices are  
13 often theorised as expressions of agency, but our study reveals that they may be imposed by situations.  
14

#### 15 *Practical implications*

16 Our findings offer some important insights to managers. Some authors believe that in the long-term  
17 aftermath of COVID-19, technological and organisational modularisation will be necessary for  
18 organisation to survive, especially if social distancing will become part of the "new normal" (e.g. Foss,  
19 2020). We believe that the inner complexity of the services offered in the hospitality industry may create  
20 an unsurmountable constrain to modularisation. If so, then organisations and their leaders should be able  
21 to "complexify" their actions (Tsoukas, 2017); in the sense that the acceptance of the paradoxical nature  
22 of a complex reality could be a way out of the problem. Our findings expose the paradoxical nature of  
23 the process, meaning that cultivating a "both-and" approach may be necessary to prepare an organisation  
24 to respond to crises (Smith et al., 2016). A paradoxical view may be important, not only to respond to  
25 organisational challenges in normal times but also in extreme times.

26 We also indicated that improvisation, or the capacity to respond deliberately in the absence of a plan  
27 (Ciuchta et al., 2021; Cunha et al., 1999; Hadida et al., 2015), is important to keep a system resilient. **As  
28 one of our informants explained, they had to "Stop using the tools we used up to now to look at the  
29 market trends... the forecasts, all business intelligence indices. Now we have to respond with instinct  
30 and speed, go straight, you have to give something" (see Table 2).** Improvisation has been considered  
31 to explain the capacity of response to jolts (e.g. Bigley and Roberts, 2001; Roux-Dufort and Vidaillet,  
32 2003). We offered a complementary explanation: improvisation is important because it supports the  
33 reliance of the system; that is, not only because of its direct but also because of indirect effects over the  
34 social infra-structure. This has important managerial implications because it shows that promoting space  
35 for ordinary improvisations in normal times (Cunha and Clegg, 2019) may contribute to the resilience  
36 of the system. Thus, while organization improvisation remains difficult to grasp because of its

1 complexity (Ciuchta et al., 2021), cultivating this improvisational competence may be another  
2 expression of gardening in normal times.

#### 4 *Research limitations and avenues for future research*

5 Our study suffers from some limitations based on the uniqueness of the setting and the usual boundaries  
6 to which qualitative methodologies are exposed. For example, COVID-19 sheds a grey light of  
7 uncertainty that could have altered the interviewees responses. Moreover, the short duration of the call  
8 for papers that animated this study represents an objective limit to any further longitudinal analysis. At  
9 the same time, the pandemic and the immediate lockdown that resulted from it in Italy, when seen from  
10 a mere scholarly perspective, provided a unique opportunity to use it as an “open lab” for testing  
11 resilience with unprecedented privileges to the in-vivo observation of an ongoing phenomenon (i.e. hotel  
12 managers reactions) as they were emerging and developing. Consequently, for future research our study  
13 indicates that studying resilience as a process may show how resilient leadership may take very different  
14 forms in different moments (Hartmann et al., 2020).

15 Following recent studies (see Linnenluecke, 2017), we also acknowledge that the focus on the hospitality  
16 industry might question the generalisability of our work to other industries that are less or indirectly  
17 affected by economic, political, and social changes. Consequently, future research might devote  
18 attention to examine whether resilient leadership is situation-specific or, conversely, we might isolate  
19 individual-level resources and capabilities that are likely to promote resilience across a variety of  
20 contexts. To better explore resilience’s context-specificity, future studies might look at whether  
21 practicing resilience differs depending upon the severity of the adversity (Williams et al., 2017).  
22 Researchers might also provide a contribution to understand whether being presented with a rare,  
23 devastating event instead of a more ordinary, even if adverse, event might affect the way in which  
24 individuals improvise resilience.

25 We focused on the leader side of the process, but the context and the relational dimension of leadership  
26 seem to be equally critical to understand the process of resilience. We also invite scholars to explore the  
27 processes whose entanglement supports the expression of resilience. Although we explored the case of  
28 improvisations, other processes (such as social capital, psychological capital, distributed leadership,  
29 etc.) may also be involved and may be studied in articulation.

30 Due to the lack of a clear conceptualisation of the term (see Hartmann et al., 2020; Williams et al.,  
31 2017), resilience might embrace the effect of related concepts, such as grit, safety, stability, agility  
32 (Linnenluecke, 2017), as well as the influence of emerging constructs, such as relational energy (Kossek  
33 and Perrigino, 2016) and perceived organisational support for strengths use (van Woerkom et al., 2016).  
34 Including these in future studies might help us to understand whether and how they explain additional  
35 variance in the way in which leaders practice resilience.

36 Finally, considering the focus of our work on how leaders improvise resilience *during* the COVID-19  
37 crisis, we do not provide evidence on whether and how the shock experienced due to the epidemic is

1 likely to foster leaders' resilience in the future. Supported by the literature on post-traumatic growth  
2 (Masten and Narayan, 2012), future research might examine to what extent leaders can benefit from  
3 experiencing a significant stressor. Given that resilience tends to be domain specific (Harms et al., 2017;  
4 Kossek and Perrigino, 2016), these benefits could be investigated by identifying the leader's knowledge  
5 domains that are specifically involved in the learning process. Inspired by this, it might be interesting to  
6 also investigate to what extent the individual growth and learning that occur following an adversity  
7 compensate for the harm suffered (see Britt et al., 2016).

8

## 9 **Conclusion**

10 The objective of this study was to explore the way in which resilient leadership unfolds when presented  
11 with a shock. Based on an exploratory qualitative research on the Italian hospitality industry, which has  
12 been hit severely by the COVID-19 epidemic (more so than other industries), this work suggests that  
13 resilient leadership and improvisation are strictly interrelated. Their interdependence leads to a paradox:  
14 to improvise resilience, leaders have to engage in a continuous preparation (i.e. gardening), while at the  
15 same time feeding their capacity to learn as the crisis unfolds. A quote attributed to the former racing  
16 driver Mario Andretti reads: "If everything seems under control, you're not going fast enough".  
17 Similarly, resilient leaders are called to be *both in the system and outside* it, so that learning can take  
18 place while planning is on the edge of control.

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