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Resilient Leadership: Improvisation, Gardening and Unlearning

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

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

This extreme event has crafted a “new normal” that carried important social implications and evident organizational costs, calling leaders to fast action of the improvised type.

Grounding on this, in our study “Improvising resilience: The unfolding of resilient leadership in COVID-19 times” published in 2021 in *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, we seek to address the following research question: *How do hospitality leaders improvise resilience in practice while facing the shock caused by COVID-19?*

Resilient leadership and improvisation

Conceiving resilience as a process that helps individuals and organisations learn and feed their self-development over time, we defined it as being about “how a person weathers a storm and the learning that results, how he or she deals with a major loss, and the processes that lead to personal choices [...] and personal growth and integrity” (King and Rothstein, 2010, p. 365). Grounding on prior research, we propose resilience as being comprised of two different yet interrelated dimensions: adaptive resilience, which defines the capacity to absorb the impact by single-loop learning and first-order change; and reactive resilience, which rather refers to the ability to look at shocks and negative incidents as sources of learning and growth at different organisational levels.

In particular, **we study resilience as a key factor to leadership**. Given that leaders are expected to guide the team toward a purpose, to encourage the employee's development, and instil a sense of engagement and commitment, their contribution to organisational performance is **essential in times of crises**. Moreover, by virtue of their ability, leaders can exert their influence over their followers, shaping their behaviours and influencing them toward the achievement of a certain goal, such as being resilient and recovering from jolts.

In practicing resilience, we acknowledge that, instead of acting following a meticulous plan, leaders are more likely to adjust to adversities as they emerge. Given that shocks and crises are difficult to predict, they are required to express a capacity for improvisation to successfully face and manage them. Thus, improvisation helps organisations to respond to crises without the benefit of planning, thus resulting a 'core skill' of resilient organisations.

The empirical research and the findings

To investigate resilient leadership in hospitality, we conducted exploratory interviews on a sample of 18 Italian hotel manager working in different cities and towns in Italy and running different types of hotels (i.e. city hotels, resorts, relais and chateau, beach hotels and country hotels, ranging from 3 to 5 luxury stars).

We performed a **qualitative content analysis** and found that two main practices are involved in the improvisation of resilience: an element of ongoing preparation, which we metaphorically called "gardening"; and the capacity to learn as the crisis unfolded ("leading while learning").

In so doing, our findings **highlight some crucial elements**. First, the two components act as intertwined rather than standing in isolation. Second, they imply a state of synergistic paradoxical tension between being *an actor in the system* to learn from events and being a *spectator of the system* to avoid being submerged by the events. This paradoxical state of *zooming in and out*, working directly and indirectly, may lie at the core of resilient leadership. Third, **resilient leadership is an improvised act**. As indicated by scholars, improvisation is not strictly responsive; rather, it implies preparation. This suggests that, in times of crisis, leaders improvise solutions that build resilience that feeds back on the capacity to conduct further improvisations. Last, resilient leadership is not about preparing the long term or responding to the short term, but it is about both: it is about planning and dropping one's plans in face of "vu jade" types of situations.

Inspired by these results, leaders should then be able to "**complexify" their actions**; in the sense that the acceptance of the paradoxical nature of a complex reality could be a way out of the problem. Our findings thus point to the need to cultivate a "both-and" approach to prepare an organisation to respond to crises.

Further, they should consider improvisation a key determinant of any organization's resilience. Consistently, **promoting space for ordinary improvisations in normal times may contribute to the resilience of a system**. While organization improvisation remains difficult to grasp because of its complexity, cultivating this improvisational competence may be another expression of gardening in normal times.

Do you want to know more on this topic?

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