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## “MANAGING STAFF WFH IN CRISIS TIMES” - HOW ARE TEACHER EDUCATION MANAGERS SUPPORTING STAFF WORKING REMOTELY AT AN ODEL COLLEGE?

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**Abstract.** The sudden onslaught of the Covid-19 pandemic changed how university managers operate. Staff working from home (WFH) needed support and teacher education managers (TEM) played an important role in giving such support. This study is underpinned by the crisis leadership theory and ubuntu-oriented management style. The aim of this exploratory study is to ascertain the support strategies provided by TEM to staff WFH during the Covid-19 pandemic. To achieve the aim, this study investigates motivational support TEM provided to staff WFH during the pandemic. The aim included establishing which stress management techniques TEM used to support staff WFH and explore communicative tools used to support staff WFH. The constructivist-interpretivist lens is foregrounding the qualitative single case research, exploring the kind of support that six distance managers provided to staff WFH at an open distance e-learning university. Results revealed that staff WFH were acknowledged and rewarded for hard work and excellence. Several web-based video-conferencing sessions were offered through online Teams webinars, seminars, workshops and stress management techniques. Further research needs to be undertaken to determine, through a mixed-method design, how TEM employed stress management techniques for staff WFH, which may yield different results.

Keywords: Covid-19 pandemic; staff WFH; stress management techniques; teacher education managers (TEM);

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Since 2019, globally, countries had to change their operations because of the Covid-19 pandemic. Most had to lock their borders to stop the spread of the virus. Furthermore, governments put in place protocols and regulations in their respective countries. Governments, businesses and households were forced to adopt new ways of operating in their daily practices. Similarly, universities and other institutions of higher learning were not left untouched by the pandemic. Consequently, these institutions had to adapt to stringent government regulations and lockdown levels. They were forced to close their doors and employ strategies to enable operations to continue while employees were working from home.

Since 27 March 2020, the South African government enforced a ‘hard lockdown’ for 35 days through the National

Disaster Act (Ramaphosa, 2020). The government declared a national state of disaster which imposed an unprecedented and unexpected nationwide ‘hard’ lockdown that effectively put extreme limits on the movement and social interaction of the population to ‘flatten the curve’ and decrease the spread of the virus (Koekemoer, de Beer, Govender & Brouwers, 2021). All South African universities were compelled to change or adapt their operations in line with Covid-19 protocols. With reference to the University of South Africa (UNISA), which is an open distance e-learning (ODEL) university in Africa, staff and students’ movements were also hindered by government regulations. The pandemic has not only affected universities’ operations, but it has also affected how university managers support employees working from home. The toll of the pandemic on employees and the challenge with the adoption of new ways of doing things have resulted in the need for support amongst many

university employees. As the pandemic continued, staff needed support from their managers, especially since working from home increased.

The managers interviewed in this study are referred to as teacher education managers (TEM). They are responsible for different portfolios within the College of Education (CEDU) at Unisa. Currently, CEDU is the largest of the eight colleges at UNISA, with a student enrolment of 102 309 students studying initial teacher education (UNISA, 2021). The university employs more than 7 000 employees (UNISA, 2021).

These TEM occupy various roles within the college, ranging from chief of departments (CODs) to the executive dean of the college, and are tasked with managing staff WFH within their various portfolios and departments during the pandemic. In an instant, TEM found themselves and their staff forced to work remotely because of rigid government regulations. It quickly became a new role and responsibility of managers to manage staff that were geographically widespread, working under extraordinarily stressful circumstances, and to ensure staff morale and productivity remained high. TEM in this study reported how they and their staff were being affected by the global pandemic and WFH in the following ways:

- A decline in mental health and emotional well-being due to limited social interaction with staff and colleagues (Killgore, Cloonan, Taylor, Allbright, & Dailey, 2020).
- Physically, due to the impact of stress, illness, family responsibility and 'zoom fatigue', managers and staff felt exhausted and stressed by the rapidly enforced use of technology to conduct most work activities and communication (Amponsah, Van Wyk & Kolugu, 2021).
- Lack of infrastructure such as well-established home offices and stable internet connections (Hughes, 2021).
- Unreliable tools of trade such as laptops as well as staff not being accustomed to working on laptops as they had previously worked on desktops (Hughes, 2021)
- A lack of technological literacy skills to rapidly move to remote working, being fully online (Hodder, 2020)

Despite being faced with all the aforementioned challenges themselves, TEM were also expected to meet the growing needs of staff WFH and offer ICT-related support to their staff, provide emotional support, motivate their staff and assist in improving the emotional well-being of staff. Just as rapidly as the Covid-19 pandemic appeared, changes in how the college TEM operated were imposed, whether managers felt ready for it or not. Staff WFH needed support, and TEM played an important role in providing this support.

Since staff were unfamiliar with remote working during the lockdown, strategies to support staff WFH during a global pandemic were not readily available. This paper may contribute to the growing field of interest in the topic, by divulging the support strategies that TEM offered to staff WFH. The aim of this paper is thus to ascertain the support

strategies provided by teacher education managers to staff WFH during the Covid-19 pandemic. To answer this aim of the study, the following specific objectives (SO) were formulated:

- SO1: To investigate motivational support teacher education managers provided to staff WFH under the pandemic.
- SO2: To establish what stress management techniques TEM used to support staff WFH during the pandemic.
- SO3: To explore communicative tools that were used by TEM to support staff WFH during the pandemic.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. Theoretical framework informing the study

This study employed a dualistic philosophical lens related to the theory of crisis leadership (Zamoum & Gorpe, 2018) and the African philosophy of ubuntu-oriented management (Khoza, 1994; Msila, 2008; Letseka, 2012), which underpin the views of TEM in this study. Globally, crises demand crisis leaders, moments of extreme courage and leadership qualities to demonstrate and lead by example. Several examples sprung to mind in the past two decades, such as the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Centre in the United States and the current Covid-19 pandemic.

These events have had a major impact on humankind and required crisis leadership to resolve the challenge. We posit that crisis leaders demonstrate virtues such as caring for people, being responsive to people-centred needs, and articulating clear communicative information in a crisis. In addition, they exhibit integrity and resilience to succeed, as well as respect for other views. Furthermore, crisis leaders inspire and encourage followers to succeed, regardless of the circumstances. In view of the latter, crisis leaders provide clear communication strategies, show caring for others in distress and futuristic leadership (Klann, 2003); empathy and courage (Pagonis, 2001; & Taylor, 2014).

During a crisis, staff would naturally expect managers to support them more than ever before; they need a sense of security, a sense of belonging and assurance from managers that they are with them every step of the way. According to Joniaková, Jankelová, Blšťáková and Némethová (2021), staff believe that crisis managers need to support them, manage the crisis and easily manoeuvre around the crisis to overcome the challenges. As indicated earlier, the African philosophy of ubuntu is based on the virtues of respect, empathy, inclusivity, restorative justice, dignity, fairness, and redress in crisis moments (Khoza, 1994; Msila, 2008; Ramose, 2002; Louw, 2006; Letseka, 2013). With reference to TEM in this study, they had managed and supported staff WFH from an ubuntu-oriented management style.

African scholars argue that it is in moments of crisis, like the pandemic, that the capacity for ubuntu-oriented management is called upon to steer the affected members of staff as online community (Khoza, 1994; Msila, 2008; Letseka, 2013). Effective leadership style is crucial during a crisis for staff support to produce expected instructional

outcomes (Haddon, Loughlin & McNally, 2015). Haddon et al. (2015) divide the crisis leadership into two: first is authoritarian crisis leadership which is rather open and centred around the leader. This style of leadership is effective during crisis which requires a swift action to enhance performance. The second style is transformational leadership, which promotes charisma and inspiration, stimulates intellect among staff and promotes shared goals (Joniaková et al., 2021; Havelson, Murphy & Riggio, 2004).

#### *B. Crisis moments require from teacher education managers managerial support to staff WFH*

During the early stages of the spread of the highly infectious Covid-19 virus, much attention and resources were allocated to curbing the physical spread of the disease and keeping the nation socially distanced. However, insufficient consideration and resources were allocated to manage the devastating impact the pandemic has on the mental health and well-being of the nation (Koekemoer, et al., 2021).

A population's psychological reactions to Covid-19 as well as the measures put in place by governments and leaders to 'flatten the curve' and reduce or slow down the spread of the virus, play a vital role not only in the infection rate, but also in the emotional impact the pandemic may have on society (Koekemoer, et al., 2021). It is thus of the utmost importance that TEM in the workplace also take their newly imposed role in ensuring emotional well-being of their staff WFH even more seriously, as this may inadvertently impact public reaction to the pandemic and lockdown regulations, as well as their productivity in the workplace (Ohrnberger, Segal, Forchini, Miraldo, Skarp, Nedjati-Gilani, Hauck, 2021).

According to the organogram of the institution, management is the highest position in an institution. When Covid-19 struck, managers were compelled to shift their leadership style to adapt to a crisis. They were compelled by the government policies relating to precautionary measures to be taken to mitigate the spread of the virus. Beauchamp, Clarke, Hulme and Murray, (2015) support the latter statement by pointing out that, in crisis, leaders should respond to dynamic changes both inside and outside institutions. During a crisis, staff depend heavily on management for emotional support as they, too, are frustrated by the sudden changes.

Managing during crisis requires skills to enhance quality performance among staff. Managers need skills such as communication, thinking, time management, critical and creative problem-solving (Huber & Helm 2020; Beauchamp, et al., 2015; Haslam, Reicher & Platow (2020). Management support goes beyond the obvious and extends to emotional, mental, and psychological support. To boost the self-confidence of staff during the pandemic, managers provide support by communicating with them, regularly asking them how they and their families are doing, well-wishing, sympathy and empathy, a positive attitude and showing trust. It is natural that staff would see managers as individuals who are stronger than they are; hence, they rely on them for all

kinds of support. Jetten, Reicher, Haslam, and Cruwys (2020) point out that, during a crisis, managers should instil in their staff a sense of belonging to an institution by developing a sense of mutual responsibility and shared identity. Managers should bring staff together and be seen as being with them all the time, during crisis.

#### *C. Crisis moments require TEM to support staff WFH administratively*

Staff performance requires positive and effective administrative support. In an institution, administrative support involves supporting staff with, among others, travel arrangements, organising and providing staff with stationery, organising meetings and other related duties. Staff members need this support daily to function and perform to expectations. When this support is effective, institutional goals are achieved, but when this support is lacking, staff perform poorly. Administrative support is crucial for staff members.

#### *D. Motivational Support Strategies during the pandemic*

Motivation is critically important to staff working from home, especially during a crisis (Erina, 2021). Every institution sets goals and objectives that need to be achieved. There are factors that can influence staff WFH negatively or positively. Staff therefore need intrinsic and extrinsic motivation to perform their duties. Intrinsic motivation is aroused by a person's belief in their own abilities and self-confidence. However, managers can enhance this intrinsic motivation by providing assurance to staff members that they are with them during the time of crisis.

Management style has a direct impact on staff motivation; therefore, the style of leadership managers adopt should reflect care and cooperation. This will motivate staff to perform effectively during such a time (Coelho, Paschoal, Ferreira, & Torres, 2021). Extrinsic motivation is derived from the availability of working tools for staff to perform their duties as required. Tools include functional telecommunication devices such as phones, computers or laptops with access to the internet. When these tools are available and functional, staff can perform their duties as expected, but when they are not functional, they cause frustration which leads to work-related stress. Staff cannot perform their duties under such conditions. It is therefore vital that managers provide this type of support to staff WFH (Erina, 2021).

#### *E. Stress Management Techniques and Communicative Tools*

As employees' jobs grow more virtual, they may face a variety of issues that increase stress and, as a result, negatively damage their health and performance (Graves & Karabayeva, 2020). Managing stress is not a simple activity performed by affected individuals. To manage stress, an employee needs support from other people, especially those close to the affected individual. Work-related stress can be managed through support from family, friends, colleagues, and, most importantly, from managers (Coelho et al., 2021) Managers can help staff WFH manage stress by opening the

channels of communication throughout the time of crisis. Staff WFH should feel that managers are there for them during difficult times.

Managers may routinely ask staff how they and their families are doing and assure them that should they need anything, they are free to contact them. They may also suggest routine exercises in the morning before starting work and in the afternoon after work (Nuur, Wawodjo, Yulianti, Suhartini, Fauzi, & Sumadhinata, 2021). Managers can encourage staff to get enough rest and take leave when they feel exhausted. In doing so, staff will know that they are not alone during a crisis, but that they are cared for and loved. That will reduce the levels of stress among staff and increase their work performance. Additionally, employers are recommended to do the following to reduce employee stress during the epidemic. First and foremost, they must manage employee workloads and relationships. Second, they should encourage employees to socialise.

This might take the shape of informal interactions, explicit chances for connection, and keeping staff informed about the organisation. Third, they should provide employees with appropriate hardware, software, training, and technical support on technology. Fourth, employers should give employees advice on how the boundary between work and home can be managed. Lastly, they need to provide workshops on how to balance work and personal lives (Graves & Karabayeva, 2020).

As much as people are different, staff levels of stress are also different, even though they may be working for the same institution. According to scholars, work-related stress as a condition could affect physical, psychological as well as emotional well-being of staff (Nugrahaningsih, 2021; Aboramadan & Karatepe, 2021). Aboramadan and Karatepe (2021) further state that work-related stress can be caused by, among others: workload; time constraint; inadequate supervision and support; hazardous working conditions; lack of job performance feedback; unstable relationship between authority and responsibility; uncertain roles of employees in the institution's overall activities.

Working from home causes stress among staff because, unlike at offices where people share their frustrations, at home one is alone. What makes it worse is that staff are not always sure whether they are doing the correct thing. Reliable communication tools such as smartphones, laptops and access to internet make staff lives easier. It eases frustration and any time they need to communicate with their managers, they will be able to do so without struggle. Managers can try to deal with barriers to communication by providing reliable tools of communication. Sometimes, staff find it difficult to communicate with their managers telephonically.

Instead, they may use e-mail. Since people are different, some cannot express their frustrations easily. However, they may find it easier to express themselves in writing. Managers, therefore, need to respond to staff correspondences promptly, even though it may not be easy sometimes because of the workload they carry themselves (Nugrahaningsih, 2021).

Crisis leaders cannot solve all technological problems, for example, they cannot solve the challenge of power outage, low signal, and internet interruptions. However, they can provide support to staff by understanding their frustrations and encouraging them in difficult times. What managers can do, is to provide staff with reliable tools of work and data for internet access. Managers need to be practical in their support to staff. Managers should not give impractical solutions to their staff problems; instead, they should be clear that some problems are beyond their control. In this case, they can instil self-efficacy in their staff (Rahman, Turin, Arif & Uddin, 2020).

### III. METHODOLOGY

#### A. Scientific approach and design

This constructivist-interpretivist lens is foregrounding the qualitative single case research by exploring the kind of support that distance managers provide to staff who are WFH at an open distance e-learning university (Yin, 2014; Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007).

#### A. Population and sample size

In the context of this article, distance managers are those executing their roles, responsibilities and functions as stipulated in the performance management policy (Unisa Performance Management Policy, 2018). Based on this policy, portfolio teacher distance managers who participated in this study were executive deans, chairs of departments (CoDs), school directors (SDs), managers for teaching and learning (MT&L), managers for quality assurance and enhancement (QA&E), managers for programme qualification mix (PQMs) and other distance managers.

These distance managers' functions, roles and accountabilities were put to the test in establishing how to support, manage and account to achieve the objectives of the strategic operations of the academic project. It consists of purposive sampling of six portfolio teacher education managers providing support to staff WFH. These portfolio managers were purposively selected as college executive management, from the executive dean to chairs of departments. In the study, the portfolio managers are referred to as "distance managers" serving in these different portfolios to manage the academic project aligned to strategic objectives of the college.

#### B. Ethical considerations

Before conducting the research, we applied for ethics approval by the university's ethics committee (Reference 2020/08/12/90159772/19/AM). The university policy stipulated that confidentiality and adherence to Covid-19 protocol should be observed before, during and after the Covid-19 lockdown. For ethical reasons as well as anonymity and confidentiality purposes, coding was used to protect participants' identity. The following coding was applied to protect the identities of the participants, namely AM5, DM1, DM2, PB3, JS6, MM1, and SM4.

#### C. Data collection, procedures and analysis

The team collectively made appointments with the distance managers to set the date and time on Microsoft Teams meetings. As per agreement, scheduled sessions on Microsoft Teams were conducted with each portfolio distance manager. Before the team conducted the online interviews, the ethical clearance certificate was provided and read by the lead interviewer to inform the participants that they could withdraw at any stage of the interview if they felt uncomfortable replying to the interview questions.

Before the Teams video-conferencing interview sessions, line managers were asked for permission to record the scheduled session. The online interviews were conducted, recorded, and transcribed. The recorded interviews and the interview research questions were sent to the research assistant to transcribe each line manager's responses. The data sets were manually done using a thematic analysis process (Creswell, 2012; Nowell, Norris, White & Moules, 2017). For this thematic process, we used the steps provided by Maguire and Delahunt (2017), reading and re-reading through transcribed data, getting familiar with the questions, and highlighting the patterns of concepts that emerged frequently under each interview question. Second, the semantic concepts and words were highlighted in each of the transcribed data. Third, we organised the data in a systematic manner, then used codes for meaning-making and identification. Fourth, we searched and identified the codes linked to the broad themes. Finally, data were clustered with each associated category and theme.

#### *D. Trustworthiness of data collection and data triangulation*

The scientific test in qualitative research is based on an empirical acid test of trustworthiness of collected data. Based on the trustworthiness and our adherence to requirements, we are assured that the data collected are credible, transferrable, dependable, and confirmable as "scientifically reliable and valid" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Creswell, 2012; Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007). In this study, we employed principles of trustworthiness.

First, we applied credible research methods aligned to the research questions, the sampling, data collections process and member checking of data collected and interpretations as "thick descriptions of phenomenon to achieve data triangulation (Connelly, 2016; Nowell, et al. 2017). Second, transferability was implemented and included the context and detailed description of TEM in the study to allow for comparisons. Third, dependability was used to an in-depth methodological description to allow this study to be replicated in any other study. Finally, confirmability is adhered to data triangulation, as well as limitations in the study.

## **IV. RESULTS**

After analysing the thematic process manually, several themes were identified, as indicated below, for each research question. During the Covid-19 pandemic and national lockdown, South African citizens were instructed to work from home to ensure social distancing rules and regulations were in place to protect workers and the population at large

from the spread of the virus. Whilst working from home, participants mentioned that staff expressed facing several challenges and looked to their managers for support during these challenging times. TEM were tasked with motivating and supporting staff WFH during the lockdown to ensure that all staff felt supported and able to fulfil their operational roles and responsibilities. The following subthemes represent the motivational support strategies TEM reported offering to staff WFH during the Covid-19 lockdown.

#### *A. Acknowledgment and reward for hard work and excellence*

While WFH during the Covid-19 pandemic came with many challenges and stress for both staff and TEM, one of the main strategies that the university instituted to support and motivate staff was to reward hard work and excellence. This offered staff both an intrinsic and extrinsic form of motivation to excel during this time. The TEM interviewed for this study were responsible for encouraging staff and overseeing that their hard work and excellence were noticed and rewarded.

PB3 expressed this when they reflected on the following:

*"High performance is a value within the institution, it is a value of excellence... and it is often rewarded. identify, recognise, develop and maximise the talent at all levels... Motivation involves academic benefits, being provided across without a favour of prejudice, therefore we had to nurture the talent we have and to do our best to maximise it for perfection"* (PB3)

Furthermore, PB3 went on to state,

- *"Academics are generally motivated by innate factors, as an academic you are motivated by innate factors, among these are a need for self-fulfilling a need for self-reliance, a need for self-sufficient, you want to be self-sufficient yourself. We hosted awards ceremonies and yesterday I attended one where we celebrated performance and achievement."* (PB3)

#### *B. Encouragement and support offered through online Teams and other communication tools to support staff WFH*

TEM noted that one of the main motivational support strategies used to support staff WFH during the pandemic included regularly offering words of support and encouragement to staff using online communication tools such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom, WhatsApp chats and WhatsApp groups, e-mails and cell phone calls. By regularly 'checking in', TEM could assess the well-being of staff and also offer encouragement. One of the main aspects touched on in the interviews by TEM is that staff mostly felt encouraged when they knew they were not the only ones feeling stressed and overwhelmed WFH, and that their managers understood and supported them in the challenging times. The College Assembly was also offered to staff as a form of online encouragement and support. Participant DM1 had the following to share in this regard:

*"have to put some positive energy and also think of words that can be encouraging and words that can*

*be comforting because you don't know what they are going through" (DM1)*

Participant DM2 also offered words of encouragement as a support strategy and stated the following:

*"I created a WhatsApp group, a platform where now I would be able to share our experiences, so whatever problem or challenge that we would be facing, then we will discuss it on that platform" (DM2)*

In addition, participant PB3 divulged the following:

*"[A]s a collective, as managers we supported academics and administrative staff members through online systems in order to determine where things were lagging... we made follow-ups through telephone calls to find out whatever challenges the staff members might have" (PB3)*

#### *C. Web-based training offered through online Teams webinars, seminars, and workshops*

Since most TEM and staff of this ODeL institution had never worked fully online and from their homes before the Covid-19 lockdown, remote working proved to be particularly challenging to those staff members who did not have the technological knowledge or skills to work entirely from home. The move to working entirely from home was unexpected and unprecedented in recent South African history.

Thus, TEM and the staff were not trained in working fully online and remotely, and some staff purportedly felt unsure about how to go about mastering this change in the shortest possible time. In support of this, the university as well as TEM worked tirelessly to design and host numerous online training platforms that would equip staff to fully work online and be able to achieve their required performance objectives and offer the best possible student service in this time. DM 1 gives an account of this when she states;

*"[staff were trained] using online seminars and workshops, currently I can say I have twelve modules fully completed of OERs." (DM1)*

DM1 further states that seminars and workshops were even better attended by staff when hosted online.

*"There is no seminar that was cancelled for teaching and learning, all seminars were held, and when I look at the attendance also of academics is far much better than when we are on campus" (DM1)*

#### *D. Motivating staff to meet commitments and deadlines through regular online Teams meetings, phone calls and e-mails to remind staff of work required or commitments.*

TEM faced challenges to motivate and meet commitments whilst managing staff WFH during the Covid-19 pandemic, such as balancing work and home life commitments. In a response to the challenge of staff balancing their work and home commitments and ensuring they meet deadlines and the objectives set out in the individual performance agreements. Participants felt that regular online Team meetings, phone calls and e-mails reminding staff of work

and deadlines were an effective and positive motivational strategy. The TEM participant (DM1) confirmed as follows:

*"I state all the modules that will be written, I put the names of all the lecturers, coordinators, CoD's the school director, the dean and the deputy dean, and then I put URL link, then I mention that if you experience any problem of uploading as a student... That is one way of supporting, instead of waiting for academics to say, my student can't upload, so I avail the link six o'clock in the morning, when they open their laptops there is the link for the day with their modules, so there won't be any problem at all" (DM1)*

#### *E. Updating and disseminating institutional guidelines to suit current needs of staff WFH during the Covid-19 pandemic*

Since the shift to remote working was unexpected and unprecedented, the institution's guidelines did not meet the needs of the current situation that saw staff WFH and conducting all of their work-related activities fully online. The university made a commendable effort in updating various institutional guidelines to meet the current needs of staff and to ensure staff were supported at all levels whilst WFH. It must also be noted that TEM took the responsibility of disseminating the updated guidelines and supporting staff in understanding them within the current context to support the optimal functioning of the university during these challenging times. Participant DM1 gave an account of this support strategy:

*" [we] re-wrote the guidelines, outlines the tariffs, outline how the markers should be appointed, which qualifications the markers must have, how they must appoint the moderators, external moderators and why must we have external moderators for exit level modules... I have become proactive by availing the assessment guidelines documents, for the college, every department will be doing it" (DM1)*

#### *F. Offering advice and support through ICT, and "Tools of Trade" related to loan laptops, provision of data bundles, and VPN to access*

One of the most prominent areas found in need of support during this data collection process appeared to be staff struggling with issues of ICT and challenges related to "tools of trade". TEM were often approached by staff to assist with challenges connecting to the institution's virtual protection network (VPN), not having enough data, not having a laptop or having outdated laptops and other tools of trade. The pattern quickly emerged that staff needed support with ICT and tools of trade, and TEM needed to find appropriate ways to offer this support remotely.

The biggest relief offered to staff in terms of this challenge was the institution-wide issuing of updated laptops to staff, issuing of data bundles to staff, and management creating special portfolios that offer ICT support within each department. All the aforementioned strategies were overseen

and implemented by TEM within their various departments and levels. Several of the participants supported this finding in the data and stated the following:

*“Interventions that we came up [with] include rolling out of loan laptops [sic- Tools of Trade] to staff members across the college of education. At least over 90% of the staff members were provided with these devices... Now another point introducing staff members to the virtual protection network, what we normally call, the VPN so that they could have access to the University website from home without being billed” (PB3)*

*“I was also responsible for liaising with ICT, most of the challenges that came from the college about ICT related problems, they had to go to the office of the acting deputy dean and I had to communicate with the director, the executive director of ICT” (JS6)*

*“Managing and ensuring an equitable provisioning of free data bundles to attend to the requisite activities and responsibilities [of staff]. We had to come into negotiations with the VP teaching learning community engagement and student support, who ensured that MTN comes into the space so that at least data bundles can be provided” (PB3)*

Regarding the results for the second research question, the study established stress management techniques used by TEM to support staff WFH during the pandemic. During the pandemic and national lockdown, staff as well as TEM in the College of Education at the site of this study, reported feeling stressed, under pressure and conveyed that they faced many challenges when working from home. TEM implemented certain techniques to assist their subordinates in stress management during this time and conveyed this information during the interview process of this study.

#### *G. Sending regular inspiring messages of motivation and encouragement to staff WFH*

TEM participants agreed that they sensed that their staff felt very stressed during the hard lockdown period during the Covid-19 pandemic and whilst WFH. Participants echoed that during the hard lockdown period, heightened stress levels had led to staff feeling physically and emotionally vulnerable, which could have resulted in lowered productivity. TEM rose to the challenge of motivating and encouraging staff during the stressful time that accompanied the global pandemic and shared their experiences and techniques used to assist staff WFH in managing high stress levels.

The main method participant TEM reported was regular ‘check-ins’ and ensuring staff knew they were not alone, that others were facing similar stress. Managers motivated staff by encouraging them to balance their work and family lives

and make use of the wellness division that was introduced by the institution to support the emotional well-being of staff. Showing empathy and sympathy emerged as one of the most positive stress support techniques. Participants divulged the following:

*“Put some positive energy and also think of words that can be encouraging and words that can be comforting because you don’t know what they are going through” (DM1)*

*“There was evidence of a great deal of stress, that was showing in colleagues... just making a call you know, you phone a colleague... come up with constructive conversations... acknowledging a colleague and show colleagues that you are aware of the situation that they are experiencing” (DM2)*

*“I listen to the staff members, advised the managers that they should advise their staff members to reduce the stress by stop worrying, balance family life with work life, learning to relax and sleep more for the sake of sanity. Learn to be comfortable in an unfamiliar situation” (PB3)*

#### *H. Building strong collegial relationships and connecting on a personal level*

An aspect that assisted staff WFH in managing stress was feeling valued and having a relationship with their TEM on a personal level, in a time when everything turned digital. The TEM gave insights into how they were managing stress levels of their subordinates by ensuring they kept in touch. Also, TEM alluded that they had a good connection, both professionally and personally, with staff.

*“any new colleague that I meet I will ask him or her what his name is... knowing the people... to be an effective leader you must reach out to them before you even talk teaching or learning” (DM1)*

*“there is a need that to talk about life in general and not just work and that also lessen or lowers the down the level of anxiety” (PB6)*

#### *I. Monitoring staff wellness by proposing that staff apply for either family responsibility or vacation leave to avoid staff burnout*

During the interviews, the majority said they were monitoring staff well-being. If a staff member was not well or they tested positive for Covid-19, applying for family responsibility was proposed. They also alluded that some staff members who had accumulated official leave days, negotiate for vacation leave to avoid staff burnout, which would impact on productivity. Another important stress management technique that emerged was that TEM should be cognisant of the impact that stress had on the physical and emotional well-being of staff and should encourage them to take leave where necessary to ensure they prioritised physical, mental and emotional well-being.

Participant PB3 presented the following statement:

*“staff members were advised to take leave when the need arose”* (PB3)

The above was also supported by TEM SM4 who said:

*“[staff were] advised to seek medical attention, so we were open, the openness, made them to cope”* (SM4)

JS6 further emphasised the importance of this. According to JS6, he had invited the university wellness officer to conduct a wellness session on Teams.

*“Encourage team members to take leave, when the need arises... and make sure that you get your health in order”. I also invite the office for wellness to talk about strategies to prevent staff-burn-out* (JS6)

The last research question related to exploring communicative tools that were used by TEM to support staff WFH during the Covid-19 pandemic. Participants felt that the communicative tools used during the lockdown period helped them to stay connected to staff WFH.

*J. Effective communication tools used, were e-mails, Microsoft Teams, mobile or telephone calls, WhatsApp messages and myUnisa online staff platform.*

When asked what communication tools were used to provide the most effective and efficient support to staff WFH during the lockdown, the data revealed a strong pattern throughout. E-mails, Microsoft Teams, mobile calls or telephone calls, WhatsApp messages, and online staff announcements on myUnisa were predominantly used to communicate with academics and support staff. These communicative tools are online, affordable in terms of data costs and offer a quick and efficient method of communication for TEM. Participants offered the following thoughts on this subtheme:

*“Phone [calls] when I feel that the message won’t be well delivered on an e-mail then I would phone and talk to the person and it is understood faster when you use the phone”* (DM1)

*“Phone calls: Online communication options has allowed me to create a more conducive environment that feels less threatening to staff... Microsoft TEAMS... WhatsApp message to the group”* (AM5)

## V. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This study employed the theory of crisis leadership and the ubuntu-oriented management style which underpin the views of TEM in this study. During the pandemic, TEM showed what it demanded from them to be courageous in leading and demonstrating leadership qualities. TEM had managed and supported staff WFH using an ubuntu-oriented management style. African scholars concur that it is in moments of crisis, like the Covid-19 pandemic, when the ubuntu-oriented management style is applied to ensure the

well-being of the affected staff WFH (Khoza, 1994; Msila, 2008; Letseka, 2013). The pandemic had a major influence on TEM leadership and required from them to resolve the challenge of staff WFH. In this study, TEM as crisis leaders provided clear communication strategies, showed caring for other in distress and futuristic leadership in the college.

Firstly, the study investigated the motivational support TEM in the college provided to staff WFH during the pandemic. According to TEM, the efforts, hard work and excellence of staff WFH had to be acknowledged and rewarded, since it increased productivity and loyalty towards the College. A Pakistani study by Abdullah, Huang, Safraz and Sadiq (2021) reported on nurses who remained loyal to the organisation despite facing challenges in the workplace as well as family-related conflicts, since they were rewarded with social and psychological support. Several participants mentioned the importance of encouraging wellness practices, such as taking time out, planning early morning walks around the block, regular exercise, and setting strict time out from on-screen work.

Furthermore, they valued technical support offered through online Teams and other communication tools in support of staff WFH. These views are supported by Fan et al. (2020), that posit that organisations should care for employees; managers should help create a healthy WFH workspace. Also, Chanana (2020) stressed that organisations needed to adopt innovative and creative employee engagement practices during tough times such as the current global pandemic. Participants mentioned several web-based training sessions through online Teams webinars, seminars, and workshops. For example, a survey study conducted in Indonesia using a SmartPLS online platform found a significant impact on digital capacity and increased productivity among staff WFH during the pandemic (Afrianty, Artatanaya, & Burgess, 2021).

Some of the TEM echoed how they were motivating staff on agreed commitments by staff WFH and meeting deadlines using online Teams meetings, phone calls and e-mails to remind staff of work required or commitments agreed upon. Furthermore, TEM alluded to the fact that they offered advice and support with ICT-related challenges, and tools of trade, such as providing loan laptops, data bundles, and support in accessing VPN. Finally, participants mentioned that staff who wanted to visit the campus during the lockdown period were issued with work permits as stipulated by the Covid-19 regulations and protocols.

Secondly, this research established the stress management techniques used by TEM to support staff WFH during the pandemic. It emerged from the interviews that sending regular inspiring messages, motivated and encouraged staff WFH. This further helped with morale boosting, which was essential for the stability, success, and sustainability of the institution (Avramoska, 2020). This created a sense of interest and helped staff WFH achieve their performance agreement targets. Participants agreed that building strong collegial relationships and connecting on a personal level were important techniques when WFH. In respect of the latter views, Avramoska (2020) concurs that building

relationships and connecting team members WFH during the pandemic is vital for staff morale and institutional success.

A New Zealand study by Green, Tappin and Bentley (2020), reported that the Covid-19 pandemic had a significant impact on workforce wellness and therefore future productivity of employees and organisations. Participants said it was extremely important to monitor staff wellness by proposing either applying for family responsibility or vacation leave to avoid staff burn out'.

Finally, the investigation explored communication tools used by TEM to support staff WFH during the Covid-9 pandemic. The TEM echoed sentiments about adapting and showing extraordinary crisis leadership skills. These managers offered motivational support, acted empathetic to the wellbeing of staff and regularly motivated staff. TEM acknowledged that dedicated and diligent staff served as further encouragement, which fostered an increased feeling of loyalty toward the organisation.

The majority (95%) of participants referred to effective communication tools used, namely e-mails, Microsoft Teams, mobile phone calls, telephone calls, WhatsApp messages and the myUnisa online staff platform. Some (65%) said they had diarised staff birthday reminders on the Teams calendar. Several participants admitted to regularly sending messages of motivation and encouragement to staff WFH, because working remotely could lead to loneliness. TEM said these messages inspired and boosted the morale of staff WFH.

## VI. CONCLUSIONS

As stated from the onset, scholars posit that, in major crises, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, the world needs strong and courageous leaders to overcome challenges, flourish and rise above the crisis. This study is foregrounded in the crisis leadership theory because we concluded that TEM demonstrated virtues such as caring for people, responsiveness to people-centred needs, articulating clear information, and commitment during crises. The crisis leadership theory served as a lens through which the study was seen. It is a theory characterised by care, sympathy, and empathy.

In the study, crisis leadership was demonstrated by TEM in the College of Education. These results were derived from data collected through interviews with college managers. TEM interviewees were aware that, during hard lockdown, staff experienced a high level of stress, which managers dealt with by continually encouraging and motivating them. TEM added to the results by sharing their experiences and relating different techniques of helping staff manage stress and perform their duties.

A positive attitude, care and sympathy were the crux of leadership during this time of crisis. The aim of the study was to ascertain the support strategies provided by TEM to staff WFH during the pandemic. We conclude that the TEM demonstrated crisis leadership during the time of crisis when staff were frustrated and disoriented because of the pandemic and were panicking. TEM, through their experiences, care and sympathy, assured staff that they were not alone. TEM

demonstrated high levels of motivation and encouragement to staff WFH during the crisis by constantly communicating with them, using Teams meetings. Constant communication proved to be vital during the time of crisis.

This exploratory qualitative single case study reported that TEM provided motivational support, used stress management techniques, and communicated effectively to staff WFH. Furthermore, TEM demonstrated how the crisis changed their managerial practices to manage and support staff WFH. In addition, the operations and performance of TEM necessitated a change in managing from a distance.

The TEM interviewed for this study showed extraordinary crisis leadership skills and offered motivational support to staff WFH by being empathetic and regularly motivating staff using effective online communication tools such as e-mails, Microsoft Teams, telephone and mobile phone calls and WhatsApp messaging.

Acknowledging dedicated and diligent staff served as further encouragement, which fostered an increased feeling of loyalty toward the organisation by staff WFH. In addition to the motivational support TEM offered to staff WFH, they encouraged staff to manage stress by using techniques such as time management, balancing work and family life and participating in the institution's online wellness programme. In addition, offering regular online training, webinars, seminars, and workshops to both TEM and staff WFH in the use of online communication tools as well as online teaching and learning systems was instrumental in reducing anxiety and stress for staff WFH. Connecting with staff on a more personal level can boost morale and reduce stress whilst staff are working remotely.

### A. Limitations and future research

This exploratory single case study posed a few limitations that can be researched by future investigations. First, this study selected and applied a qualitative single case design for data collection. Online Teams videoconferencing interviews were used to collect data for the purpose of the study. Future research will be explored through either a quantitative or a mixed methods approach to validate the themes emerging from this study. This will be important to yield new data about crisis leadership for TEM managing staff WFH. Second, this study explored TEM operations in crises in the College of Education at an ODeL university. Future research with the other eight colleges at the same university will be conducted but also in residential university contexts. Finally, future research will allow for comparisons amongst colleges at the ODeL university that will generate distinct or universal results to crisis leadership.

### B. Practical implications for crisis leadership

The study was conducted under extreme pandemic circumstances and the findings contribute to the theory of crisis leadership as revealed through the dynamics of major moments as displayed by the TEM in the College of Education, at an ODeL university. By strengthening the virtues and practices of line managers during crisis moments, as demonstrated by TEM in this study, such leaders are

equipping and will be responding to the “new norm” positively. This paradigm shift in crisis leadership, as demonstrated by TEM at a distance, had impacted daily operations, functions, and individual performances. This change in leadership style had impacted the institution’s human resource policy imperatives. The study recommends that specific HR policies, such as the wellness policy, performance management policy and tuition policy, should be revised and adopted to comply with HR procedures under which managers operate during and post the pandemic. In view of crisis moments, the university management and council may consider the design of a timely crisis leadership programme to equip portfolio managers with competencies at the respective colleges as well as research units at the ODeL university.

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