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**Managerial Communication in Virtual Teams in the
context of COVID-19 pandemic**

Scientific Coordinator: prof. univ. dr. Constantin Schifirneț
PhD Candidate: Isvoranu (căș. Cristea) Gh. Georgiana

Ph.D. Thesis Summary

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Ph.D. Thesis Summary

Although the study of virtual teams appeared more than years ago, in many cases Romanian managers, and not only, found countless reasons and excuses to request the physical presence in the office of the employees in the teams coordinated by them. The reasons ranged from: lack of trust in people's conscientiousness and seriousness, lack of necessary technology, lack of direct manager control (due to working from different places) or lack of physical interaction. The companies' responses to the physical restrictions associated with the crisis generated by COVID-19 brought new opportunities to work in virtual teams (Cristea and Dinu, 2022) and all the managerial reasons and fears described previously had to be overcome in just a few days.

The pandemic played the role of a catalyst in the digitization of certain companies and helped accelerate this process. The specific context generated by the COVID-19 virus accelerated the need for companies to make a fast transition to virtual teams offering very few opportunities to prepare for this transition (Kilcullen, Feitosa și Salas, 2021). The state of emergency demanded from organizations, managers and employees quick answers to certain questions that had been asked for several years, but had never received an articulated solution: "Can we work from home? How can I trust that people will perform their job duties exactly as they would if they were in the same office as me? Will we have the same results if people are no longer directly and constantly controlled and supervised?". According to studies carried out by Gallup (2022) on a representative sample of American companies, 53% of the companies participating in the study stated that they will continue with hybrid work, 24% that employees will work completely from home or from another place of their choice and only 23% of companies stated that their employees will return to working from the office, as they did before March 2020. In Romania, according to the study carried out by EY (2021) between November and December 2020, on a sample of 204 respondents, 68% of the participants stated that they worked from home or remotely and 28% went to work, also 84% of respondents indicated that their workplace allows them to continue to telework long-term and 11% of them stated that they cannot continue working unless they are physically present in the office (p.9). Cepăreanu (2022) emphasizes, in the article published in the *Ziarul Financiar* following the *ZF HR Trends 2022 conference: The reset of the labor market*, the challenges of human resources managers regarding the return to the office: the anxiety of employees used to work from their homes, burnout and the need for digitization of internal processes in organizations.

Given that there is still no generally accepted answer to the questions: "What type of team will best meet the future demands of the labor market?" and "What type of management will succeed in contributing to the most effective and sustainable organizational structures?" (Stratone et al., 2022) it is still necessary to study and identify the best practices to communicate with virtual or hybrid teams, to coordinate them in the most efficient manner and to succeed in obtaining the same or better results than the ones of traditional teams.

Global trends ("megatrends") affect individuals and organizations around the world, and mobility and flexibility are two such trends which influence our daily lives, including how we work or interact with others (Großer and Baumöl, 2017), and technology, through continuous progress, has supported the emergence and development of these global trends. Many employees of the future will remain loyal to companies that: manage to meet their demands for flexibility, provide the framework for their well-being, and have employee-centered HR and leadership policies that encourage authentic interactions (Vătămănescu et al., 2022; Cristea and Dinu, 2022). To keep up with the emergence and continuous development of new technologies, companies that want to survive in this global and competitive market must face a permanent process of adapting to change and reconfiguring organizational strategies (Petrou, Demerouti and Schaufeli, 2018).

The need for continuous adaptation, as a new style of thinking specific to the new global dynamics, has directed the attention of many companies from the traditional and functional way of working, mainly focused on production, to more flexible, more creative, and innovative operating models (Vătămănescu, Alexandru, Cristea, Radu and Chirica, 2018), capable to respond to both the consumer and the employee today. In order to demonstrate flexibility, many of today's organizations have made the transition from structures with multiple levels of hierarchy to a much simpler organization with only a few levels of hierarchy, with electronically mediated interactions in most cases, to facilitate access to information, to shorten waiting times and limit the impact of certain blockages within the organization on internal or external customers (Lilian, 2014; Jarvenpaa and Tanriverdi, 2003).

The physical restrictions imposed by authorities around the world have turned each of us into virtual customers as well. To better meet the demands of the digital consumer, companies have enabled facilities that in turn allow high levels of virtuality (Brunelle, 2012) and given the rapid access to information offered, the structures in the organization can today overcome the limits of time and space, and face-to-face interaction, classic buildings and company headquarters

are becoming less and less important (Jarvenpaa and Tanriverdi, 2003). This change is happening in corporate life at a speed never seen before in human history. If in the early 1900s in the United States the first office configurations, born from the need to use innovations, were just emerging, after the appearance of the first computer (in 1979), change became a constant and technology a central element in the case of any change. The foundations of today's virtual communication were laid more than 40 years ago when IBM first experimented with telecommuting with 5 employees working from home. An experiment that 4 years later (in the year of the launch of the Internet) counted 2000 employees and paved the way for a radical change, constantly influenced by the development of new technologies. Before the global impact of COVID-19, more than 70% of the global workforce worked from home at least once a week (IWG, 2018).

Facilitated by globalization and the connections established more and more easily thanks to technology, the functioning of organizations is done in the form of open systems (Harrison and Shirom, 1999) and not as independent entities - companies being an integral part of a “network”, in which they are together with customers, suppliers, partners as well as other similar organizations, the exchange of information being carried out through information technology and virtual communication (Jarvenpaa and Tanriverdi, 2003).

Companies must deal as efficiently as possible with several simultaneous constraints: the lack of competent and qualified personnel, the increased demands of consumers, the demand for low prices, which do not affect the high quality of the services offered, the high care given to the client and their continuous guidance, and many other requirements. All of these challenges have put organizations in a "position to reduce staff, subcontract labor, enter into strategic alliances or other types of collaborations enabled by technology, activities that have often been facilitated by virtual teams" (Lilian, 2014, p. 1251). We can say that in the first instance virtual teams represented a way of reducing costs and an efficient use of organizational resources, initially used mainly by multinational companies. Remote management of teams arose in many cases as a necessity, at times when employers could no longer find labor locally and had to hire people from other countries who had the knowledge and skills that companies lacked (Bergum, 2014).

Within these virtual teams that are spread over distances of sometimes hundreds of kilometers, face-to-face communication is non-existent and completely replaced by communication by electronic means (computer-based communication or Computer mediated

communication-CMC) (Lilian 2014; Bergum, 2014; Gilson, Maynard, Jones Young, Vartiainen, & Hakonen, 2015).

The changes brought about by the extensive use of technology, as well as other peculiarities of working in virtual teams, force leaders to acquire new skills, develop certain competencies of the past, and change attitudes and behaviors that worked before (Eissa, Fox, Webster and Kim, 2012), to be able to deliver results and demonstrate that they are performers in the new contexts. Studies done so far on virtual teams have highlighted the fact that the manager can make a considerable difference when it comes to team performance (Hamersly and Land, 2015; Serrat, 2017) in achieving success in this type of teams (Cascio and Shurygailo, 2003).

We can conclude that today's leaders are in a dual situation: on the one hand they can enjoy new opportunities that did not exist more than 20 years ago that new technologies offer through the high degree of flexibility, through mobility and instant access to information (Gilson et al., 2015), but on the other hand we are also talking about the limitations that come with these new technologies and the obstacles they put in communication and direct interaction among employees or between managers and employees.

Studies related to human resources management postulate that it is not long before we witness the disappearance of employment contracts in their classic form as they are today (with a fixed or indefinite period), as a result of the number of virtual employees, contracted for collaboration only during the projects will increase, and these people will make a permanent transfer of knowledge and information with their counterparts, virtual teammates and communicate within networks or online communities (Vătămănescu, Nistoreanu and Mitan, 2017), being members of to some virtual teams or "teleworkers" (Bergum, 2014) or "remote employees" (Purvanova, 2014; Bunce, Wright and Scott, 2017). One of the advantages of virtual teams is the fact that their members can participate in several projects at the same time, as they are specialists on a certain topic in these projects. Studies have shown that the area of overlap and simultaneous work on several projects happens frequently in virtual teams and does not decrease the performance of those who work in this way (Gassmann and von Zedtwitz, 2003). At the same time, virtual team members can use the latest technologies and applications within the teams in which they work, adapt their working methods more quickly and respond more easily to requests, given the facilitation of communication by technology (Lilian, 2014; Bunce, Wright, & Scott, 2017). Another reason why virtual teams are becoming an increasingly used HR technique is their

ability to bring together the diverse knowledge and experience of individuals who are not physically located in the same location, providing access to a wide range of resources and with increased potential for innovation and diversity (Batarseh, Usher and Daspit, 2017). There are studies (Gallupe, Cooper, Grise and Bastianutti, 1994; Hollingshead and McGrath, 1995) that have suggested that virtual teams can achieve higher levels of creativity and generate a greater number of ideas than teams who interact face-to-face, due to the diversity of team members.

The literature on remote management (Connaughton and Daly 2004; Bell and Kozlowski, 2002; Duarte and Snyder, 2001; Lipnack and Stamps, 2000) indicates that this type of management is different and, in many circumstances, more complicated than traditional management (face to face collaboration) of employees. The difficulty may vary depending on the field of activity, the types of tasks that employees have and may consist of lack of non-verbal communication, time zone differences, lack of physical interaction, lack of direct control of subordinates, difficulty in gaining trust employees and maintain it, the more difficult ability to foster a certain organizational culture (Bergum, 2014) and all these require from the leader an increased effort, more time and more energy in the communication and management of his team (Malhotra, Majchrzak and Rosen, 2007). The recent study by Handke et al. (2020) states that success factors for virtual team management would include: effective leadership and people empowerment, effective communication, and coordination, maintaining high levels of trust, high performing technology, information sharing, performance management, a good organizational culture and the adaptation.

All these roles must be fulfilled by the *e*-leader under the pressure of multiple simultaneous challenges: geographical distance, temporal distance, perceived distance, interdependent tasks, and diversity of team members. Thus, the manager is forced to create the framework for mutual understanding, knowledge sharing and find the common ground for an optimal organizational culture (Morrison-Smith and Ruiz, 2020). Equipped with these skills, the manager will be able to choose the appropriate way to approach systemic crises at the communicational, organizational, and managerial level, so as to make his interaction with these virtual teams more efficient through complete, timely and quality communication.

The role of this paper is to understand the characteristics and variations of managerial communication over the years in order to adapt to virtual teams or with remote teams, as well as to analyze what is the role of managerial communication in the development and the functioning of teams with online interaction. The purpose of this argumentative scientific approach is to

identify if there is any dependency relationship between work performance and managerial communication, in virtual teams in the specific context generated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Scientific objectives: 1) investigating managerial communication and analyzing the types of managerial communication used in virtual teams; 2) analyzing the specifics of virtual teams and the potential of managerial communication to have implications in the performance of this type of teams; 3) investigating the opinion of employees from several companies, members of virtual teams, regarding: the communication climate and managerial communication techniques used during the state of emergency, trust in the direct manager and Top Management, commitment and engagement to the company and self-reported performance (via an online questionnaire); 4) investigating the opinion of managers of some virtual teams regarding: communication with these teams in the context of the pandemic, challenges and opportunities felt, strategies to lead virtual teams to achieve organizational goals (through a semi-structured interview).

All the research hypotheses were tested in the context of the state of emergency, at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in Romania, between May and June 2020. **The ten hypotheses** that will be tested through the present paper are:

H1: The open communication climate positively influences trust in the direct superior.

H2: The open communication climate positively influences employees' trust in the organization.

H3: The open communication climate positively influences attachment to the organization.

H4: The open communication climate positively influences employee engagement.

H5: The open communication climate positively influences employee performance.

H6: The trust in the direct superior positively influences trust in the organization.

H7: The trust in the organization positively influences attachment to the organization.

H8: The attachment to the organization positively influences employee engagement.

H9: The attachment to the organization positively influences employee performance is higher.

H10: Employee engagement positively influences employee performance.

This paper aims to study, understand and evaluate the impact of managerial communication on important processes in the organization, in the specific context generated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, based on the empirical aspects presented in academic papers and accumulating the arguments emerging from the study of the specialized literature (detailed in the theoretical chapters of the paper), the proposed hypotheses were supported by recent studies, with high international visibility (Morrison-Smith and Ruiz, 2020; Syakur, Susilo, Wike, & Ahmadi, 2020; Breuer, Hüffmeier, Hibben, & Hertel, 2020; Prasetyo et al., 2021; Nordin et al., 2021). By formulating the ten hypotheses, a comprehensive model is proposed, which has not been studied as such in the specialized literature until now.

Methodology

The main research method used in the empirical section of the paper was the sociological survey based on a questionnaire, a quantitative method that allows finding out specific characteristics of a sample or a targeted population. A convenience sample was used, and respondents met certain criteria: to be employed in state owned, private or NGO companies, to have worked from home during the COVID-19 pandemic and to speak Romanian.

A total of 314 people responded to the questionnaire and from this total, 313 questionnaires could be considered for validating or invalidating the research hypotheses. The questionnaire was applied using the online platform: www.i-sondaje.ro , between May 1 and June 1, 2020. The questionnaire had a total number of 13 items, divided into several sections.

In addition to the sociological survey based on a questionnaire, we also conducted a sociological survey based on a semi-structured interview, as a qualitative research method. To complete the information obtained through the quantitative method (the questionnaire), we conducted 11 interviews with managers who, during the pandemic triggered by COVID-19, coordinated virtual teams, for the first time in their career. The interviews were conducted between May 11 and May 30, 2020, during which Romania was under a governmentally imposed state of emergency and then state of alert, so most employees and managers were still working from home. The interviews were conducted online, using the Skype and Zoom platforms, selected according to the preference of each respondent. All interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of the study participants, the recordings being used exclusively to transcribe the details to be analyzed. The method used to interpret the data obtained from the interviews was Descriptive

Phenomenological Analysis (hereinafter referred to in the paper as DPA- Descriptive phenomenological analysis). The method is described as a form of distillation of the observed phenomenon in which the analyst sets aside, step by step, everything that is not essential, in order to arrive at an adequate description of the phenomenon (Morrow, Rodriguez and King, 2015, p. 643). Descriptive phenomenological analysis aims to reveal the "essential" or "essential structure" of the investigated phenomenon, which makes it what it is (Morrow, Rodriguez and King, 2015) or the "essential structure of subjective experiences" (Järvinen and Mik-Meyer, Eds., 2020).

Conclusions

The analysis and interpretation of the eleven semi-structured interviews carried out in the context of the crisis generated by the COVID-19 pandemic with managers who coordinated virtual teams for the first time highlighted how they felt the changes brought by this atypical period, as well as the meaning attributed to the events lived. From the conversations it was clear that they experienced radical changes, with visible effects both in the personal spectrum and in the productivity part of the team, and in the area of communication and motivation of the team members.

The medical crisis caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus started at the end of 2019 and since February 2020 has spread rapidly throughout the world. The contradictions both at the national level and at the global level regarding several aspects regarding the new virus (mask wearing, social distancing, mode of transmission, incubation period, protective measures, etc.) have generated among the population of our country mistrust, but also a state of continuous uncertainty. That is why the initial reaction of many of those interviewed was one of denying the seriousness of the situation, in the hope that our country will not be affected. This reaction was somehow supported by the news from the initial period of the epidemic which presented the situation as having a temporary character, conveying that the pandemic will end in a month or two. Thus, many of the participants testified that although this epidemic was known, there were no plans within the companies to deal with the possible implications and risks, so that the moment of March 11, 2020 caught many of them unprepared. From the statements of the managers interviewed, the key moment of this period emerged, with the greatest impact on the business environment in Romania, namely the announcement of the governmentally imposed state of emergency, as a result of which

a very large number of managers and employees had to work either exclusively from home, or to alternate work from home with work from the office, under certain strict conditions.

Besides the impact on people's health, the pandemic also influenced the business environment, with some companies being forced to greatly restrict their field of activity and consequently to lay off people or send them into unemployment.

All these aspects configured a totally new organizational context, and the managers saw themselves in front of an unusual, unplanned situation, which they had not experienced before, lacking training or a guide where to look for answers. They had to coordinate some scared and fearful people, concerned on the one hand with the health and physical safety of themselves and their loved ones, and on the other hand with job security. Employees were no longer in the same place as their managers, and the workplace was one of multiple difficulties and challenges. Other barriers that had to be overcome very quickly at the beginning of this period, in order to be able to carry out work in the new conditions, were technology not accessible at home, lack of Internet connection, lack of specific equipment, lack of a space dedicated to work, working with small children, all coming against the background of a general state of anxiety and lack of certainty.

The main difference between classic virtual teams and those during the COVID-19 pandemic comes from the way the transition to working from home was made it was imposed and forced by the external circumstances and not one desired by the companies' management, planned and organized *a priori*. Basically, managers found themselves unable to work next to their teams in just a few days, and the ability to supervise and control their work was very limited. This entire framework forced managers to show vulnerability and invest greater trust in team members. As stated by most respondents, this trust was rewarded and generated from people engagement and commitment to the direct manager and to the company. Another difference of the new teams that worked from home during this pandemic was the state of mind of the members of these teams. As an outcome of this research, most people experienced negative emotions, ranging from intimidation to fear, scariness, panic, or anxiety. Within this framework, the efforts done by managers to motivate employees to work and generate the same level of performance had been hardened. One third of the participants reported that main needs specified by their teams were understanding and empathy, such creating the appropriate communication climate desirable to get the best results, a climate that shows support/encouragement.

All participants emphasized the advantages and positive consequences of creating a supportive and open communication climate, that embedded a manager that showed empathy, openness to listening and understanding, adaptability and flexibility (especially when it comes to perform task in one's own pace). Managerial communication during the crisis had to be honest, on time, structured and cared towards the employees. The interviewees noted the moments when Top Management communication was forced, seemed fake and lacked authenticity, so untrusty. Another aspect noted by the participant managers related to the lack of trust described previously refers to the communication consistency: there were fast taken decisions, many changes that companies and managers should undertake. A context filled with uncertainty, with people wandering for clear direction and meaning of the actions already underway, a daily changed communication led to more panic. Also, the change of the information and the lack of consistency between ideas that were communicated led to lack of clarity, lack of direction and perspective, matters noted by the questionnaire's respondents.

Lack of consistency and structure that some of the respondents experienced contributed to the increase of fear feeling that employees went through. Main concerns, during the crisis, were the health and physical condition, fear of unknown, not knowing what is going to happen in the middle and long run and up to the top fear, that prevailed in the responses of the managers: fear of losing job. Managers stated that the fear of losing job made some employees to get more engaged and more committed; managers felt people spent more energy and efforts in performing tasks to prove they deserve to be part of the team and of the company, thus showing commitment by these employees and, on the other side, their behavior could be explained by the lack of opportunities (part of the organizational commitment).

However, this research has not identified a consensus related to productivity of the teams that worked from home, the answers being quite scattered in opposite ways. The respondents that stated the teams were more productive than in the classical working format emphasized the main contributors factors: the fact people could work from home was highly appreciated, the freedom and the flexibility to self-manage their tasks (opportunity long awaited, that had been denied by the company until then), no interruptions (that usually happens in an office environment that led to decrease in efficiency), the restrictions imposed by authorities that banned leaving home (so people tended to work more, including beyond working schedule), working on new tasks that they liked and had meaning for the teams' members and generated quick and visible results. The

appreciation of the opportunity to work from home and the efforts made to please the company are expressions of the normative engagement, that generated performance and civic organizational behavior, as managers that participated in this research stated. The other way around, for the teams that did not perform at the level before the pandemic, managers perceived several reasons for the lack of performance. First category of reasons that have been identified were related to external environment, such as: restrictions imposed by the authorities with huge impact on some economical areas and the customers and business partners decisions that were called off, which led to being unable to sell/buy; the second category of reasons were related to internal matters, such as: lack of structure and lack of prioritization of the tasks – that led to chaotical management, overwhelming the team members and lower performance than in the past; lack of consistency in Top Management communication and making late decisions.

The interviewees unanimity recognized the importance of trust during this unusual time, both of trust given to employees and the trust received from employees. When it comes down to managerial trust components, specific for this particular context, the respondents emphasized the critical role of affection-based trust: the employees feel they can share with their manager ideas, concerns, emotions, they feel they can speak freely and open and they knew the manager would come up with constructive solutions. In case of trusting organization and Top Management, there were respondents that appreciated their kindness expressed by being concerned of the employees' welfare, identifying their needs, considering of their feedback and the willingness for open and fair communication about the company's status. Among the negative aspects of Top Management integrity, respondents pointed out: lack of consistency between the messages sent and actions that were taken, the doubt on management ability to deliver their promises, lack of authenticity in the communication process.

The research showed a consensus on some positive aspects brought up by this crisis, aspects that can be grouped in two categories: administrative (organizational) and perceived personal transformation. From the first category the examples were various: the quick acquisition of laptops for all virtual team members, adding separators to offices, the flexibility of work schedule in shifts. The second category brought several learnings and positive transformation that were assimilated by the interviewees: fast growing up, acquiring crisis people management techniques and methods of difficult situations and conflicts, responsibility and ownership in decision making, perseverance and will in supporting points of views in front of higher hierarchy,

better prioritization of tasks and openness to giving trust. There were respondents that were impressed in this time by the altruism showed by their respective team members, by the honesty in communication, by the dedication and commitment in delivering tasks and by the emotional care.

By analyzing all the interviews, the outcome was a widely spread idea that this period can be considered a time for study, a framework that enabled experiences and learning so to be ready for a likely restore of an emergency state or, in some cases, a frame for change for good of the classic work format in the favor of remote work (partially or totally). The interviewees pointed out the importance of learnings and lessons that can be used to draft a guide on how to better respond and act in a similar context in the future, either on communicating with the clients and business partners, managerial communication and trust and empowerment to employees, in providing the flexibility on how to perform tasks (considering the personal and company's objectives) or a new way to assess work.

Most of the respondents acknowledged that post-pandemic times will generate a shift in working paradigm: in many cases, the co-located teams will be phased out, some roles within the organization will be changed or even disappear, while other will come up, driven by the requests from social or business environment. Out of the speeches of the interviewed managers emerged clearly the new working environment will cause quick and accountable decisions while passivity and lack of reaction, supported by the hope that things would come back to the normality from February 2020 will no longer be taken into account.

From the quantitative research the outcome showed the communication climate perceived by the participants to the survey was neutral to supportive, with managers that did not criticized people without providing explanations, they did not judge them and showed openness, listening to their both personal and professional issues. The respondents noted that the degree of control and surveillance exercised by their managers were high, tending to constantly check the work done by the human resource. The openness showed by their managers was appreciated, openness expressed by the will to find out new ideas from the team' members. The pandemic context faced the managers to a new working paradigm they have never experienced before, and the lack of preparation and a practical solutions or best practices guide highly contributed to achieve this degree of openness.

The energy, the sustained efforts for long periods of time, the engagement in working had both internal and personal causes (the will to prove personal value and to confirm the trust received from the line manager, the joy of performing new and meaningful tasks) and external causes (lack of interruptions, the imposed restrictions, the impossibility of having various activities). One thing to take into account is the balance between personal and professional life, considering that during that time many employees immersed themselves in work on expense of their private life that came second as importance.

The sacrifice of the personal life had as main goal keeping the job, which was justified by that specific context. Also this happened to avoid additional changes on the current ones that could not have been in control, by lack of opportunities on the labor market and the lack of confidence that another company could provide better or similar benefits than the current ones.

During the lockdown one of the main concern of the people was to get informed by the evolution of COVID-19, to be able to act to ensure safe and security for their beloved ones and for themselves. A common feature of that period was fake information or contradictory information, that increased the unsafe and uncertainty feelings. Thus, the employees state of mind was not actual a positive one, they were waiting for the manager to be open to discuss both professional and personal issues, to share with them the ideas, feelings, expectations, to be listened and understood. From tasks point of view, the respondents stated they did not want to receive extra meaningless tasks and to be able to count on the professionalism and competency of the line manager.

Contributions and theoretical implications

The present work proposes and assess a comprehensive structural model that analyses simultaneously the complex relationships between the studied structures (The communication climate, trust in the direct manager, trust in the organization and Top Management, the engagement to the organization, commitment, and performance). The current approach contributes to the completion of the national and international literatures that focuses on the systemic consequences of the pandemic at the organization level. The research on managerial communication among virtual teams, especially in the context of COVID-19 is still a “shaky” target, an ongoing phenomenon that triggers the attention and the interest of the theorists and practitioners.

The research showcases an X-ray picture of how the managers related with the communication challenges in the pandemic context, a systemic unprecedented crisis that changed the empiric reality on multiple levels (social, health care, technological, cultural, economical, educational). This is one of the first exhaustive research of this kind conducted in Romania and Europe. The study provides the frame to highlight - through a mix research design – both detailed and deeply anchored in perceptions details of the interviewees and the general reporting, percentage aggregated of the managers that took part in interviews.

The paper contributes to the issuance of the valuable judgments and future sociological investigation directions, backed by rigorously empirical research regarding the proper manner to tackle systemic crisis at the communication, organizational and managerial levels.

Contributions and practical implications

Summing up together the qualitative and quantitative data, we can identify the importance of some managerial communication techniques that can be used successfully in similar situations, in highly adversely impact on organizations crisis. Therefore, based on the current study findings, the following recommendations have been drafted.

Firstly, in crisis context manager should be able to show empathy, to create an appropriate context for an honest communication, to try to understand the emotions and feelings of team members, to place himself in their shoes, listening to both professional and especially the personal issues, because the affective trust has an important role in creating a good working environment and stimulating the engagement towards the company and the commitment.

The organizations should clearly show their concern for the employees' wellbeing, to ensure them that they can count on the company's support if needed and to reinforce the shared principles and values. In crisis context, people priorities change, and the main needs become safety and stability. Thus, the employees need to be re-assured that the organization, although faced with external multiple challenges has the ability to identify and prioritize the important aspects for them and to provide solutions aligned to expectations.

In the context generated by COVID-19 people appreciated to be consulted, asked and the decisions made at the organizational level to have been priorly validated by the team. A communication climate defined by a high degree of control from the manager is unproductive, and

forcing the managers' points of view, the constant attempt to change others' opinions and attitudes and constant check of task performed will not lead to higher performance but people demotivation.

Not lastly, the management communication should be consistent, clear, and constant. In a social context defined by instability, sudden decision changes, uncertainty and contradictory information, people need to see their manager is in control. Also, the employees expect clarity and perspectives, receiving tasks and directions whose purpose had been explained and they priorly understood what the task is for.

Finally, it is worth to emphasize the importance of such an empiric study to increase the level of understanding of the idea that quick and relevant responses of the decision makers within a crisis context are vital.

I have created through this research the frame for three questions that we will answer at the end of the study. Did managers achieve to adapt and to communicate efficiently? The answer of this questions is rather nuanced. Some managers learnt as they went, they have adapted quickly to the new communication means and to the new requests, they have answered positively to the needs of their team members and the uncertain environment activated their creative potential and they acted as a catalyst for the interaction, efficiency, and performance of the team members. Some other managers were blocked by the vast amount of changes that faced overnight and they acted rather reactively, waiting for the things to just happen and later coming up with some idea. The efficient communication within this context had to be clear, concise, specific, consistent and in time.

Did managers take advantage of this crisis to improve their reputation and trust? This question also has not an easy answer. Managers that previously built good relationships with their teams, that were vulnerable and open to share their concerns and fears but also open to listen ideas, feelings and people expectations gained a lot in terms of reputation and trust. On the opposite, the incomplete and delayed communication, the lack of integrity and authenticity, unfair treatment and lack of kindness are just a few of the aspects that eroded the manager's trust.

Have they been successful in generating performance together with their team members? Data gathered through the two research revealed the performance need more conditions to be met simultaneously. The employees need to have a strong affiliation feeling, to identify themselves with the organization, so being able to make sacrifices and to endeavor on the long run to get results.

The new organizational environment, the new normal, caused the need to have mature, responsible, and accountable managers, with an open mindset, able to make decisions while considering their implications, looking at the man behind the task and not at the task and result alone, thinking on a long term, managers able to articulate and communicate a vision based on shared values and beliefs.

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