

The new challenges imposed on managers by the COVID-19 pandemic

I. The manager facing the crisis

Coping with a crisis starts in the company's daily life. Managing a crisis is, above all, working to avoid it. At the same time, it means implementing procedures in the company that allow managers to foresee scenarios and prepare to overcome turbulence.

However, given atypical scenarios such as the pandemic phenomenon experienced in the last year, fear and uncertainty reactions are inevitable.

The emergence of new priorities in a new, complex and rapidly changing work environment presents a challenge to the administrative capacity of managers from all segments, especially those most affected by the pandemic.

With the onset of the new coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19), traditional teaching models proved impractical. According to data, only 6 of the 69 Brazilian federal universities joined remote learning in the first half of 2020¹, while the others suspended the semester. The main justification for this majority decision would be the precarious access to classes of its student body. A considerable part of the students were simply unable to follow the content because they did not have an internet connection.

The adoption of remote learning, although fraught with challenges, proved, however, inevitable. The rapid contagion in Brazil already premeditated a situation that would not be contained soon². Resistance to remote learning would only make life difficult for those who needed to quickly graduate in order to find a job and guarantee their family support.

At that time, the attitude of adhering to distance learning and presenting action plans for its realization, building inclusion projects to serve needy students, was presented as the correct decision, but not widely accepted³. Decision-making required, in addition to intelligence, the manager's courage, especially in a scenario of great resistance from conservative poles.

Not everyone is able to make tough decisions. But everyone can learn to be efficient at their posts. Decision making is therefore central to the leader's role.

¹ G1, 2021.

² UOL, 2020.

³ USP, 2020.

One of the main lessons I have learned about management practice is that, in a period of rapid structural change, the only ones to survive will be transformative leaders. A transformative leader uses transformation as an opportunity. This leader seeks change and knows how to distinguish good change and how to make it effective, both outside and within the organization.

Building the future is highly risky. However, it is less risky to try than not to try. A fair number of people who will try will certainly not succeed. But people who don't try are sure they can't.

It would be in a moment of exceptionality like this that a leader would distinguish himself. Mário Sérgio Cortella already said: courage is not the absence of fear⁴. Fear does not prevent a true leader from acting with courage. It is exactly at times like this that the efficiency of managers is put to the test. True leadership, as Drucker said, is tested in times of adversity.

Although all 69 universities had to deal with an exceptional situation, only a few of these administrations showed planning and quick response capacity.

The minority decision of the Federal University of Mato Grosso do Sul, to dive into a hitherto unknown scenario and promptly adopt remote learning, exposed at least three important characteristics of leadership: critical thinking; the courage to choose the correct decision, even if resisted; and the concern with proposing ways to carry out this decision.

In his work *The Effective Manager*, Peter Drucker highlights that the effectiveness of an executive is in the practice of choosing correct decisions, not necessarily acceptable⁵.

A good manager should not be concerned about the resistance provoked or the acceptability of his decision. A fallacy applauded by many people is still a fallacy. The solidity of a decision points more to positive results than its popularity, especially considering the current reality in which the exercise of critical thinking has become less and less common, giving way to the herd mentality.

A leader does not necessarily need to be loved or admired for his decisions. Leadership is not about charisma, but about the leader's performance. As Drucker says, "Popularity is not leadership but results."⁶

⁴ CORTELLA, 2016.

⁵ DRUCKER, 1966.

⁶ Ibid.

Another lesson that I think is important to mention is the need for managers to maximize the company's strengths. In practice, this means that, when running a company, the manager must position himself where the company's strengths can produce maximum results.⁷

A practical example of this strategy, in 2020, can be seen in the management of YDUQS, the second largest private education network in Brazil. The company sought to reinforce its specialization in the medical course, after noting that the course was the one with the lowest dropout rates, even in the pandemic.

As a result, the company was able to increase revenue in the quarter, albeit only 3.5%. It's a considerable effort, given the perfect environment for dropouts.

The result was so satisfactory, to the point of threatening the first place of its main competitor, the teaching network Cogna. Cogna, unlike its competitor, did not know how to get around the crisis, saw its revenue drop 21% and had its accounts tremendously shaken by the coronavirus pandemic. The drop would be justified by the fact that its customer base is mostly low-income, which would leave it highly exposed to economic cycles.

Thus, the results of YDUQS would come from taking advantage of opportunities, that is, from exploring new paths. As Drucker says, "the important challenge in society, in the economy, in politics, is to explore the changes that have already taken place and use them as opportunities."

II. The importance of planning

Planning is also an important characteristic of leadership. In the management scenario, we consider planning (short, medium and long term) precisely so that we can have a horizon to follow and understand the implications of the decisions that will be taken in the short term. This will serve so that, in the event of a crisis, pre-defined actions are already thought out and can be applied in order to give a quick, objective and effective response to the problems that are affecting the organization's progress within what was previously planned - in a way that the losses resulting from the crisis are not maximized, due to lack or delay in the response.

A leader who plans is more likely to get positive results and is less subject to uncertainty in times of crisis. The concern of the Federal University of Mato Grosso do

⁷ DRUCKER, 1967.

Sul (UFMS), for example, in presenting an action plan, when deciding to adopt distance learning in an uncertain scenario, helped to contain unforeseen events and ensured the employee greater security and control over the situation.

This planning, however, must be preceded by the manager's attitude in knowing the qualities and limits of his collaborative body. Commitment to action in decisions must be as close as possible to the capabilities of the people who must carry it out. Actions taken without judgment can be ineffective or even harmful, even causing a waste of money.

Drucker, in one of his writings, also gave us the advice that you cannot build performance based on weaknesses, much less on something you can't do⁸. The concern of UFMS, for example, in seeking to train its faculty in Distance Education was fundamental for the execution of its project to offer virtual classes, especially if taken into account the little experience of the institution's professors in teaching classes by through this route. According to data released by the institution itself, more than 2.5 thousand classes were offered to train teachers in distance learning technologies.

At the same time, the various inclusive initiatives carried out by the institution were also important. The university raised financial resources and created several digital inclusion grants to help purchase notebooks, computers, internet packages. More than 800 chips with 20GB of data were also distributed.

Just as it is important to know your faculty, it is also essential to know the reality, characteristics and limits of university students. Knowing the student body, it was possible to adapt them (especially needy students) to the new teaching model.

In addition, the University was a pioneer and protagonist on the national scene, creating the "Connected Villages" project to bring the internet to UFMS indigenous students in their villages, and so many other innovative initiatives to maintain the fundamental rights to health and education of students.

An interesting point of planning is that, even when executed without measuring any future event, such as a pandemic, your efforts almost always come to fruition at some point. Although it could not foresee a pandemic in 2020, UFMS ended up reaping the fruits of its intelligent attitude of setting aside financial resources for moments like this. Situations like this expose the importance of planning for the success of a business and for crisis management.

⁸ DRUCKER, 1967.

The other Brazilian federal universities, on the other hand, when opting to suspend the first semester of 2020 and adhere to distance learning only in the second semester, they had to live with several other adversities. Among the problems, we can mention the difficulties in establishing calendars (tables) in common agreement with the community and in dealing with students who needed to accelerate their graduation.

These problems arise from the fact that when we don't have the exact vision of the path we are following (vision provided by long-term planning), we tend to make the easiest decisions that can even generate good results in the short term, but which have a huge potential to create problems in the medium and long term, problems that they will tend to be much more complex to resolve than if we had, at the time of decision-making due to specific crises, the exact vision of the organization's future. The importance of this long-term vision was summed up by Peter Drucker in the phrase "Long range planning does not deal with future decisions, but with the future of present decisions."⁹.

III. The training in administration

At the same time that UFMS executed its action plan, 85% of Brazilian federal universities remained with their classes suspended, aiming to develop action plans to resume classes in the second half of 2020.

This, in a way, exposed the disparity in the management of Brazilian universities in the pandemic, as they all dealt with the same unexpected situation.

This disparity certainly has some factors. It is possible, among them, to mention the habit of practicing training.

In his work, already mentioned, "The Effective Manager¹⁰", Drucker deals with the formation of competent executives through the teaching of effectiveness. The author points out three requirements for training an effective manager. One of these requirements would be self-development, the search for continuous improvement through the expansion of knowledge, whether formally or practically.

The UFMS community, although it has never experienced any pandemic phenomenon, was already constantly seeking to self-develop and keep up-to-date with the various technological innovations. Several virtual resources have already been used by the university to connect with the student and institutional body. An example would be the moodle platform, which was already in use before 2020, and which was later

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ DRUCKER, 1966.

adapted for the pandemic period. If face-to-face communication failed, it was already possible, in that time, to maintain contact with the academic community through various platforms via the Internet.

At the same time, allied to that, the relevant and continuous studies carried out by the research and extension groups, which, stimulated by the resources raised by the academic management, knew how to respond promptly to the needs of the academic community in the face of the pandemic.

In addition, it is also important to highlight the frequent training carried out by one of the main responsible for the success of the university's management, the dean Marcelo Turine. Turine has in his curriculum several recent experiences in the areas of management and technological innovation. He was even one of the creators of one of the main student platforms in Brazil - the SIGProj. The manager's recent practices demonstrate his constant concern to keep himself updated with managerial and technological innovations.

The efforts of the entire collaborative body would be of little use if the company's main active voice remained inert in its personal development and self-management. Kent once said, "No one can sabotage a quality program faster than a leader who doesn't engage."

At the same time, Drucker's lesson is worth commenting on: The greatest benefit of daily training would not be learning something new, but doing better what we already do well.

IV. Giving voice to youth

The idea that efficiency would be directly linked to experience had been questioned for some time, but this question intensified with the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. In times of crisis, mainly because of an unknown problem - like COVID-19 - governments are even more forced to use their critical thinking skills, as it is more difficult to decide without sufficient information about the problem. Allied to this, it is essential that they know how to manage the time and resources at their disposal, as a wrong decision can lead, in the short, medium or long term, to situations much greater than those initially faced, especially when it comes to related matters to life, as is the case with the pandemic.

Leaders around the world were marked by the quality of their pandemic management. With regard to the management of nations, for example, a considerable

number of young heads of state showed a positive administration of the pandemic, while many more experienced leaders did not have the same result.

It cannot be said that any country in the world has defeated the new coronavirus. But it is possible to see differences in the results achieved due to the way the disease is treated between nations. Brazil, for example, governed by 66-year-old Jair Bolsonaro, is the second country in the world with the highest number of infections and deaths from the disease. And even with a large population, which partly explains the lethality, the country spent 20 consecutive days beating its own records for average deaths. To date, nearly half a million people have lost their lives for covid-19 in the country.

Despite the difficulties faced by the country, the situation could be different if there were less denial and greater investment in science - to ensure research that responded more quickly to the pandemic - and in the Unified Health System (SUS), in addition to better crisis management.

On the other hand, some young heads of state showed a positive balance regarding the containment of the virus, as is the case of Jacinda Ardern (40), from New Zealand. Since the beginning of the pandemic, the country has registered 2,600 cases and 26 deaths. Even with a small population, with just over 5 million inhabitants, the numbers represent a good performance when compared to any federative unit in Brazil, which has a similar population.

With regard to the management of educational institutions, the situation was no different. Several of the new generation leaders demonstrated confidence in dealing with the situation and, as a result, surprised the experienced leaders and employees.

Maurício Nogueira, 39, manager of Anima, one of the largest private educational groups in the country, has increasingly demonstrated that leadership and efficiency are not necessarily linked only to older generations.

Never waste a good crisis. The famous phrase of former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill facing the wreckage of World War II served as an inspiration for the executive in the midst of the coronavirus scenario. Nogueira sees the pandemic as a great opportunity for different attitudes, better decisions and for the institution's growth. And the motivation comes from the lessons learned from the changes that directly affect the education sector.

The manager sought to invest in the digitization and modernization of its services, while providing students with new forms of financing and debt negotiation. In

addition, he has taken out educational insurance to ensure the student finishes the semester if he or the income provider loses his job.

UFMS is also one of the management cases that sought to explore the wide facility of the new generation with technological devices. The University gave the academic community at UFMS, especially students, the opportunity to propose projects, ideas and actions to face the challenges of society from Covid-19 onwards¹¹.

With this, it was possible to select more than 80 proposals for the formation of a platform of projects, ideas and actions for research, extension and technological innovation, in the various areas of knowledge, which would later prove to have a high impact on fighting the Covid pandemic. 19 and its social impacts.¹²

This important step in the management of the University would be related to the practice, already mentioned in this text, of “Maximizing the positive sides”. By opening up to the entire academic community the opportunity to propose projects to fight the pandemic, the high management summit would be conditioned, above all, on listening to projects proposed by people of the new generation, known for having been born adapted to the digital world and for being a generation that can handle change more easily.

This same strategy of resorting to the proposals of young people has even been used by several family businesses at this time of pandemic. Aiming to adapt companies to the digitalization needs - evidenced by the pandemic -, several managers have sought to promote the new generation to leadership positions. Young people who had been waiting for a long time to be heard, with the pandemic, gained a voice in companies and gained a license to operate.¹³

V. *Finally...*

The atypical scenario experienced in 2020 left great challenges for business and managerial work in, especially for managers of educational institutions. The pandemic highlighted technology as an essential resource to ensure the survival of companies. Suddenly, managers needed to reallocate investments and people to adapt to the new environment of mostly virtual meetings, without a roadmap to follow.

They had to break paradigms by deploying real-time solutions, and that was

¹¹ UFMS, 2020.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ ESTADÃO, 2020.

just the beginning. The unexpected events required investments in innovation from all institutions - it is estimated that they anticipated the digital transformation by five years, which placed the technology in a fundamental position to adapt to the unstable and unpredictable scenario.

The pandemic changed people's habits, such as consumers, students and professionals, and brought permanent changes to the way we live. Physical classrooms have given way to virtual classrooms and distance learning has become an active practice in universities around the world.

After the emergence of this new virtualized reality, the new generation began to gain more and more voice in companies and institutions around the world. With the help of young people, who are known to have an easier time dealing with technology and change, companies would be more likely to dodge the negative effects of the pandemic and convert losses and complications into profits and learning. The lack of space in companies, which these young people had, no longer makes sense in this new reality in which their proposals can make a total difference in the management of institutions. The pandemic, in addition to highlighting the need for institutions to adapt to the digital age, also highlighted an old need: to give voice and opportunity to lead to young people.

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