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Doing Business in the 'New Normal': COVID-19 School Leaders' Language Manners

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Abstract

As the not-so-new-now coronavirus pandemic has affected all walks of life, education has not been an exemption; what is more, it is one of the most severely hit sectors.

The unknown crisis created unprecedented circumstances for all participants in the education process, and school leaders have had a double job: to navigate their institutions and to look after their employees. The latter is a pretty delicate task - they have had to keep doing business and running their companies while minding the language since physical distancing necessitated the use of electronic communication, thus making room for vagueness and even misinterpretations. Ten education leaders of primary and secondary schools in North Macedonia have been video-interviewed on everyday COVID-19-related situations from their workplace context. Discourse completion tasks (DCTs) have been employed as a data elicitation method. Being given the open-ended, only topically specified scenarios, the respondents are asked to recreate their language reaction to situations that have happened in their newest pandemic work life. The interviews have been transcribed, and the leaders' language choices have been analyzed. The findings show that, luckily, the leaders have been mindful about their words and have mostly chosen to use positive, calm, and encouraging language.

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Introduction

The global pandemic has brought us more than 100 million COVID cases, and of those cases, more than 2.6 million people have died, let alone the billions of people whose daily lives have been changed socially, professionally, and financially.

In such a melancholy and sadness caused by this unprecedented event in modern history, mapped into the business context, the experience of managing through it is not necessarily unique. As Perkins (2021) says, throughout the pandemic, leaders have found themselves in positions they simply were not prepared for, managing teams through an evolving obstacle course of both professional and personal challenges. Simply, the pandemic has meant that all companies are affected by an event that threatens their stability and that of the business sector in which it operates, both nationally and globally, so business leaders have had to implement modifications to their corporate strategies and new organizational management models to face a new reality (García-Sánchez et al., 2021).

Ling et al. (2020) say: "Leadership is a language game." According to the theory of motivating language, leaders can motivate and inspire their subordinates through their oratory skills. The motivating language used by leaders powerfully influences the leader-follower interactive process as a result of its role in establishing followers' relational and psychological states, including their work motivation. The choice of words used by leaders is one of the most effective strategies for instilling a perception of their credibility and trustworthiness within employees.

Leaders who engage in motivating language (e.g., empathetic language) establish close emotional connections with their subordinates, inducing a high level of effective trust that fosters a feeling among employees of being respected and cared for by the leader. As a result, subordinates will then reciprocally engage in more proactive behaviors that are likely to have beneficial outcomes for the organization. Through close interactions with subordinates, leaders can build an active environment wherein followers feel safe and comfortable and are willing to work proactively above and beyond the scope of their duties. As a matter of fact, according to previous studies, harmonious interpersonal relations and a supportive atmosphere can foster employees' proactive behavior.

As García-Sánchez et al. (2021) maintain, positive words such as 'help', 'support', 'confidence', 'commitment', 'improve', 'advantages' instill positivity and security in the followers in their leaders. It can be concluded that such language choices make the employees trust their superiors and feel secure at their workplace. Likewise, when referring to negative discourse, leaders usually use softer negative words, such as 'stop the spread', 'vulnerability', 'protect' and 'promote a safe and healthy workplace'.

Talking about school leaders, an empirical study commissioned by the Wallace Foundation called *How Leadership Influences Student Learning*, is commented by Leithwood, et al. (2004, p. 7, cited in Murgel, 2011) who found that "Without a powerful leader, troubled schools are unlikely to be turned around". This study says: "Many other factors may contribute to such turnarounds, but leadership is the catalyst" (p. 7).

As Leithwood et al. (2004, cited in Murgel, 2011) claimed: "Today, principals and superintendents have the job not only of managing our schools but also of leading them through an era of profound social change that has required a fundamental rethinking of what schools do and how they do it. This is an assignment few sitting school administrators have been prepared to undertake" (p. 5).

In the current situation, a very popular person is Dr. Anthony Fauci, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease at the National Institutes of Health.

Health, who is widely admired for his straight talk and steady demeanor. Cable News Network (CNN) has called him “a public force” who translates complex medical information into everyday language. His strategy is: “You don't want to impress people and razzle-dazzle them with your knowledge,” Fauci says. “You just want them to understand what you're talking about.”

Since, like a virus, words are infectious. They can instill fear and panic or facilitate understanding and calm. In the given, pandemic context, calm and understanding are needed, so words should be chosen wisely.

As the current crisis has created unprecedented circumstances for all participants in the education process, school leaders have had a double job: to navigate their institutions and to look after their employees. The latter is a pretty delicate task - they have had to keep doing business and running their companies while minding their language, since physical distancing necessitated the use of electronic communication, and instead of increasing and improving communication, it made room for the void in communication, vagueness and even misinterpretations. Being scientifically challenged to investigate the situation in our country, R. North Macedonia, we are conducting research that centers on the following hypotheses:

- *H1: During the COVID-19 pandemic, leaders have been mindful of their use of language.*
- *H2: In pandemic circumstances, when interacting with their employees, leaders use more positive, encouraging than negative, reprimanding language.*

Drawing upon the literature sources on the topic of using language in the leader-employee interaction, further in the text we analyze the language that our interviewed school leaders have used in the most common everyday situations, such as thanking and reacting to one's good performance that usually requires praising.

Methodology

First, convenience sampling was used to recruit ten (10) leaders of primary, secondary, and private language schools in North Macedonia, that is, the authors had contacted (via phone or email) school leaders to whom they explained the goal of their research and its method, and asked them if they would like to participate. Once the leaders had agreed to be included in the research, the authors sent them a consent form, which was signed by all the leaders thus confirming to have been fully informed about the research: what it was to be about, how it was to be conducted, what their part was to be in it, that their contribution was voluntary and completely anonymous, meaning that no disclosure of their identity would be ever made and that they could withdraw from it at any time.

Second, discourse completion tasks (DCTs) had been used as a data elicitation method, that is, the leaders were given open-ended, only topically specified scenarios of everyday COVID-19-related situations from their workplace context.

Being assigned a situation, the respondents reminiscent of a case that has happened in their newest pandemic life (after 16 March 2020) and recreate their language reaction to it. The interviews have been videoed, held via the Cisco Webex platform, recorded, and transcribed. Eventually, the leaders' language choices have been analyzed.

The interview consists of seven (7) items: the first five (5) gather information about the gender, age, education level, sector, and length of the interviewees' leadership position before proceeding to the next, and two (2) situations that formed the core of the interview: how they have recently apologized to an employee and have recently thanked.

The authors have chosen to ask the leaders situations that are common to their everyday business context so that they would easily identify themselves with the given scenarios.

The interview was piloted with a leader of a language school in Singapore. The school's leader gave his answers to the situation. Once the piloting went well, we proceeded to conduct the actual interviews.

Results

Of the ten leaders interviewed for this study, five (5) were heads of private language schools, three (3) were leaders of public primary schools, one (1) was a leader of a public high school, and one (1) was at the head of a private high school.

As far as the gender is concerned, eight (8) were female (80%) and only two (2) - (20%) were male.

Concerning the age, three (3) leaders were in the age range 30 to 40, another three (3) were in the group between 40 to 50 years old, and four (4) school leaders were 50 to 60 years old.

Regarding education, six (6) leaders had a bachelor's degree, and the other four (4) held master's degrees.

Certainly, the sector they came from was education (as only that sector was investigated), while the length of their leadership position varied. Only one (1) interviewee was leading less than a year, one (1) was leading for three years, one (1) – six years, one (1) – eight years, two (2) – ten years, one (1) – fourteen years, one (1) - fifteen years, and one (1) – twenty-five years.

Table 1
Interviewees' Demographic Data

Characteristic	Categories	#	%
Gender	Male	2	20
	Female	8	80
Age	30-40	3	30
	40-50	3	30
	50-60	4	40
Education	Bachelors	6	60
	Masters	4	40
Sector	Education	10	100
Leadership position	Less than a year	1	10
	3 years	1	10
	6 years	1	10
	8 years	1	10
	10 years	2	20
	14 years	1	10
	15 years	1	10
	25 years	1	10

Source: Authors' calculations based on survey results

In continuation, we analyze the situations that we have selected to be subject to our study.

Apologizing to an employee

The form 'sorry' is analyzed as prototypically associated with apologies, a speech act that has been described as "perhaps one of the most ubiquitous and frequent 'speech acts' in public discourse and social interaction" (Lutzky, 2020). It is thus a speech act that we use and encounter regularly in our daily lives, which is mainly

due to its importance on a social and cultural level as well as its association with polite language use. An apology implies that some wrongdoing has occurred which results in a breach of social and cultural norms and requires remedial action. By apologizing, the speaker acknowledges the offense, takes responsibility for it and expresses regret.

When apologizing, 'sorry' is the most common form, as our corpus shows that later, but other words that can be used to apologize are: 'afraid', 'apologize', 'apology', 'excuse', 'forgive', 'pardon' and 'regret'.

When a leader apologizes, the followers view the leader's behavior as a socially responsible reaction to wrongdoing. A sincere apology signals vulnerability and transmits moral meaning, allowing the repair of interpersonal relationships to begin. As complex speech acts, apologies have a range of positive effects, including generating forgiveness, restoring trust, reducing aggression, enhancing future relationship closeness, and promoting well-being.

Up to now, there have been no studies that directly examine how followers perceive leaders who account for their mistakes with apologies, but it is believed that they can play an important role in developing and repairing leadership perceptions in organizations, and ground this prosocial orientation in transformational leadership theory.

When individuals perceive their leader as fair based on the way he or she behaves (e.g., apologizing), they are likely to believe their leader engages in those behaviors willingly. Then, leaders who apologize will be seen as doing so because they care for the individual and the relationship, which reflects individualized consideration, another integral component of transformational leadership. Mistakes, wrongdoing, and other unusual situations are critical moments that attune followers to the behavioral intentions of their leaders.

The following table shows the patterns used by our respondents when the situation required an apology on their part.

Table 2
Apologising Patterns Used by the Interviewees

Used phrase	# of interviewees
I apologise	3
I am sorry	4
No formal pattern	2
No answer	1

Source: Authors' calculations based on survey results

One leader has claimed that, due to the wonderful collaboration she has with her employees, she has never needed to apologize, so no answer has been recreated in this scenario.

When given the situation, two leaders recreated their reaction without hinting at any form of apology, with one of them talking about the problem - rescheduling classes but without actually apologizing to the students for canceling their class that week.

The actual words being used are:

I have an urgent thing to do today at 9:30 so the classes are canceled; we are going to have the classes on Friday this week because this group does not have classes on Friday so it is okay.

This is not apologizing at all, since the speaker focuses her expression on the task – rescheduling the class (what would have required an apology) – instead of feeling responsible for doing something wrong and feeling sorry.

The second of these two ‘non-apologizing’ leaders have used ‘please’, which has been her way of excusing her behavior and ‘softening’ the assumed wrongdoing. This interviewee’s right words are:

Please don’t take me for granted this period because I am really out of my mind and I have a lot of problems so please just try to understand me.

Again, no explicit, straightforward, formal apology is given, but semantically regret not doing something right is felt and the speaker is admitting to not having behaved well.

The typically apologizing pattern used by three leaders will be portrayed with this answer:

I apologize for not informing you that today’s classes were canceled.

And the ‘sorry’ answer has been given by four leaders. One of these four, after being told the news of the employee about not feeling well and possibly having contracted the virus, has said:

I am sorry to hear that, we’ll find a substitution; just keep me informed about your test result and your general health.

So, out of the ten (10) interviewed leaders, seven (7) have given an apology in situations that require such a reaction, which makes us conclude that our school leaders use emphatic language.

Thanking an employee

Besides apologizing, thanking is another language strategy that shows care for the interlocutor. It is essential to thank people, to show appreciation, and to never expect them to simply just do things (Perkins, 2021).

As leaders, it’s essential to express gratitude to the employees, especially now. For one thing, being thankful to the team is the right thing to do. People are battling fears about the pandemic and juggling home and work nearby. Almost every employee needs to hear that their dedication is noticed and it matters. What’s more, gratitude is proven to show improvements in self-esteem, achieving career goals, decision making, productivity, and resilience.

When people around the leader feel seen and acknowledged, they return the favor, invest more in their efforts, and form stronger connections — all essential ingredients to offset the stress of a crisis. What is more, giving thanks can be infectious. Even when we’re uncertain about the present and future, one thing that we control is our actions. We can choose to help sincere expressions of appreciation catch on.

When leaders share their affection with their employees and compliment them for a job well done, the employees feel valued and appreciated. They feel that their work is valued and worth the efforts to act proactively. These feelings are likely to increase their motivation to reproduce them and may lead to self-directed actions and the initiation of changes at work (Binyamin et al., 2018).

The following table shows how thanking has been used by our respondents.

Table 3.

Thanking Patterns Used by the Interviewees

Used phrase	# of interviewees
Thank you (so, very much)	8
No pattern	2

Source: Authors’ calculations based on survey results

Eight (8) leaders have formally (and semantically) thanked their employees, while two (2) have done it covertly – their expression does not contain a thanking word,

but they are equally encouraging and appreciative of their employees, if not even more than those who have been openly thankful.

The following example illustrates an extended gratification given by one leader:

Thank you, thank you so much, because despite your current situation/illness you did your best, were able to hold your online lessons from home, and I am deeply grateful for it.

In this expression, 'thank you' is strengthened by 'so much', and as if not enough, it is all emphasized with 'grateful'. The interpretation is that the speaker wants to repeat her gratefulness.

Another leader who did not use a formal means to thank but semantically expressed his satisfaction with his employee's proposal said:

Wow, that is a great idea, I think we should try this, we should see how it goes. I believe it could work. If you need my support, I will be online, you can call or message me and I can help. I believe it is a great idea you have.

There is no mention of 'thank you' or words and phrases similar to it, but the leader chooses to show satisfaction with his teachers' behavior by praising his work using the words 'great', 'we should ...', 'I believe', and making himself available to the employees – to contact him whenever they need.

Another leader and school owner has recreated her very characteristic way of thanking her teachers, saying that whenever she is satisfied with their behavior and results, she thanks them by using the following sentence:

The students come to my school because of you, because of the teachers.

This is a very powerful sentence, which praises the teachers' work better than any other thanking pattern and openly motivates the employees to continue working in the way they do.

All in all, the thanking strategy entirely shows the leaders' inclination to use motivating language.

Discussion

There has been considerable debate in the literature on whether empathy is mainly an affective or cognitive phenomenon. The affective view on empathy emphasizes the notion of empathy as an emotional response, such that empathy encompasses the ability to share or experience another person's feelings or emotions, while scholars following the cognitive view on empathy, on the other hand, explained that empathy is a person's intellectual understanding of another person's internal state.

More specifically, we define leader empathy as a leader's ability to accurately recognize and understand the emotional reactions and feelings of their followers. This understanding, in turn, helps leaders to respond appropriately to the needs of their followers and to craft an appropriate (emotional) response.

Generally, leader empathy is perceived as being central for managing social relations because empathic leaders are said to be more effective at managing the emotions of their followers. Consequently, it is a common theme in the leadership literature that leaders who are skilled at identifying and responding to follower emotions are also more effective.

Leaders' expressions of empathy are associated with a higher ability to manage follower emotions. It is an inevitable fact that empathy is an important social construct that can create bonds between individuals or build barriers when empathic behavior is not presented at the appropriate times, and women tend to have better empathy than men.

Conclusion

This study's results support the two hypotheses set as a ground for our research. Namely, the results show that during the COVID-19 pandemic school leaders have indeed been mindful about their use of language, since they have properly reacted to the situations that needed recreation of their responses. In other words, they apologized when apologizing was in question, thanked when thanking was needed, adequately reacted to their employees' good performance, and cautiously used their expressions when reacting to the teachers' failure.

The answer to the first hypothesis is drawn from the second hypothesis, which is also supported by our analysis. That is, when interacting with their employees, leaders use more positive, more encouraging than negative, reprimanding language, seen in the following conclusions: out of ten (10) leaders - when apologizing, seven (7) have chosen to give an open apology; and when thanking, eight (8) interviewees have used positive words to express their gratification. This shows that the leaders' use of positive language prevails the neutral or less encouraging (but not explicitly negative) language.

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