

Račaitė-Samušienė, Vineta; Šaparnienė, Diana; Juknevičienė, Vita

## Article

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# Change Leadership at Local Self-government in the Context of COVID-19: The Case Study of Lithuanian Municipal Administration

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**Vineta Račaitė-Samušienė**

Vilnius University, Šiauliai Academy, Lithuania

**Diana Šaparnienė** 

Klaipėda University, Faculty of Health Sciences, Lithuania

**Vita Juknevičienė** 

Vilnius University, Šiauliai Academy, Lithuania

## Abstract

Contemporary challenges require public sector institutions to adapt the changing environment and to ensure an appropriate internal management processes, including the leadership. Leaders are expected to inspire and create a vision, and advocate for that vision throughout the periods of growth, disruption or uncertainty. In recent years of pandemic the importance of change leadership increases in local self-government. The aim of this article is to examine the change leadership in Lithuanian municipal administration in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and on the basis of research results to form the assumptions of strengthening of change leadership in local self-government organisations. Analysis of theoretical aspects revealed main features of change leadership and its connection with transformational leadership in the context of public administration institutions focusing on the COVID-19 pandemic. The scientific methods such as document analysis and qualitative semi-structured interview have been used for the empirical research, based on the case study of selected Lithuanian municipal administration as the field of research. The research results revealed that during the period of changes assumed by the COVID-19 pandemic the managers of Lithuanian municipal administration act like leaders of change, resolving problems in teams and flexibly reacting to current issues.

## Keywords

Change leadership, Transformational leadership, Local self-government, Public sector, Municipal administration, COVID-19, Lithuania

## JEL Classification

O15, J45, H12

## Introduction

Leadership focused on changes in public sector (especially in local self-government institutions) becomes an essential success factor in achieving vision and high results of performance in organisations. Municipal administrations have to change due to global changes and policy priorities (Miao et al., 2018). Referring to the challenges of global world, frequently appearing emergencies that force organizations to adapt to unforeseen activity scenarios become a challenge for every manager of organization. Therefore, the duty of local self-government institutions is a successful implementation of change leadership (Fleming, 2017; Amis and Janz, 2020). One of such emergencies is COVID-19 pandemic that forced organisations to look for new types of activities and management, ability to react rapidly to changing threats.

According to Židonis and Raišienė (2020, p. 3), change is inevitably associated with uncertainty, ambiguity, disturbances, therefore, it is important to find measures how to deal with such situations, to act in them and to make sense of what they mean and what they may lead to. Here the leaders play the crucial role in public sector institutions as in the context of changes leaders as well as their followers need to jump when the opportunity arises (Uhl-Bien, 2021). Leadership is often defined as a main drive of changes and related aspects in public sector (Van der Voet, 2016; Bennett, 2018). According to Schmidt et al. (2017), leaders are not only change drives but also the key characters of change implementation. Especially important role of change leadership falls on local self-

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## Corresponding author:

Vita Juknevičienė, P. Višinskio str. 25-402, Šiauliai, LT-76351, Šiauliai, Lithuania  
Email: vita.juknevičiene@sa.vu.lt

government institutions that are closest to the citizens and respond to people's needs and expectations, that have to change promptly the strategy of their activities in emergency situations and be able to effectively cope with the consequences of emergencies (Sun and Henderson, 2017; Dzigbede et al., 2020).

Recently, in order to achieve effective management responsive to environment's situation, theoretical insights and practical discourses focus on change leadership. The essential role of the latter is to initiate changes and implement them effectively (Buil et al., 2019). During the research carried out by Holten et al. (2019), it has been found out that public sector institutions slowly react to innovations and organizational changes. This has been verified by results of the research carried out by Ricard et al. (2017), which showed that employees of public sector institutions critically evaluate the need for new ideas in their activities and tend to perform their duties following the defined functions. Management of public institutions is focused more on performance of management functions, lacking leadership that would focus on initiation of innovations and changes. Global and rapidly changing environment, emergency situations (e.g. the COVID-19 pandemic) show a clear need for the managers' quick reaction to the situation, leadership, ability to see and manage changes in public sector institutions.

The abundance of theories and styles of leadership shows that this concept is manifold. Some authors (Van der Voet et al., 2016; Ramsey et al., 2018; Alsayyed et al., 2020, et al.) relate the change leadership to transformational leadership. The latter one is indicated as "umbrella" leadership that focuses on innovations and changes, motivates the employees to rise above their personal interests, to participate actively in organisation's changes. Change leadership focuses on initiation of a particular change and its effective implementation. Therefore, when analysing change leadership, the article pays much attention to the concept of transformational leadership.

According to Wagner et al. (2012), change leadership is related to leader's abilities, therefore, the analysis of leader's personal qualities during the period of constant changes, the analysis of influence of leader's activities on employees and the analysis of ability to communicate, present the need for changes as a normal reaction to ongoing public processes become very important. It is obvious that the COVID-19 pandemic assumes the changes in local self-government institutions, therefore, leaders' role is emphasized in scientific research. The importance of leadership in change management, change management in organisations, in public sector, in local self-government institutions were emphasized by various scientific authors: Paarlberg and Lavigna (2010), Adamonienė and Čiutienė (2011), Liukinevičienė and Norkutė (2011), Ritz et al. (2012), Šaparnienė and Simaitienė (2014), Rybnikova et al. (2015), Steude (2017), Benson (2018), Židonis and Raišienė (2020), Alsayyed et al. (2020), Toleikienė et al. (2020), Skorková et al. (2021). Matjie (2018) researched the efficiency of leadership and emotional competences of the managers of public sector and the influence of these relationships on provision of services; Davidson and Butcher (2019) examined how application of management based on leadership principles helps to become effective district managers; Schmidt et al. (2017) studied how changes are managed in public sector organisations; Van der Voet et al. (2016) analysed the factors that disturb the opportunities of change leadership and employees' participation in change implementation; Bolden (2020) was interested in complexity of leadership during the period of changes; Amis and Janz (2020) analysed change leadership and change management during the pandemic; Homeniuk et al. (2020) examined the influence of pandemic on municipalities; Dzigbede et al. (2020) discussed the insights how to strengthen the response and recovery after the COVID-19 pandemic in local government. Research analysis shows that although the leadership topic has been widely examined, change leadership in the context of local self-government institutions especially assumed in emergency situations is scarcely analysed.

Lithuania is the young developed European country. Institutions of Lithuanian local self-government met pandemic challenges with no legal or technological preparation. However, municipal administrations had to adapt changes and continue their performance by distance, managers (heads) had to learn how to lead virtual teams, etc. This required to make some changes in the legal basis and to expand personal and organizations competencies. Particular pandemic situation changed traditional ways of acting, recognizable both practically and scientifically. Therefore, the change leadership gained the peak of the importance in the context of uncertainty conditions. However, there were too few studies on change leadership in Lithuania before.

Trying to disclose still unrevealed issues, research problematic questions have been formulated: What are the peculiarities of change leadership in municipal administration in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic? What are the attitudes of the heads of Lithuanian municipal administration towards the changes? How it is possible to strengthen change leadership in Lithuanian local self-government institutions? The object of the research – change leadership in Lithuanian municipal administration.

**The aim of the research** – to examine the change leadership in Lithuanian municipal administration in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and on the basis of research results to form the assumptions of strengthening the change leadership in local self-government institutions. In order to achieve the research aim, the scientific methods of theoretical analysis and qualitative semi-structured interview (with six top and middle level municipal administration managers from the selected Lithuanian municipal administration) have been used. In such an urgent context as COVID-19, the research strategy was based on the case study (the exploratory study's approach), aiming to get some knowledge and come up with new ideas (Swedberg, 2020), therefore, the small sample is

justified in this case. Results were systemized, analysed (categorized) and interpreted.

## Theoretical background of the research

Scientific literature provides two different positions on the leadership in the public sector. De Gennaro (2019) states that leadership in public sector institutions does not fundamentally differ from management in private sector because it is characterised by two types of interaction – political and administrative – pursuing results through the others that perform the key role in directing and leading the organisation to the implementation of its aims and tasks. While Ingraham and Taylor (2004), Orazi et al. (2013), Mau (2020) emphasize that exercising leadership in public sector organizations is different from leading private organizations, because of significant bifurcated administrative model, split leadership, combined with democratic accountability, oversight procedures created by legislatures, and intense media attention, therefore, public sector leaders should behave mainly as transformational leaders, preserving integrity and ethics in their activity, having the right and obligation to overcome a variety of perceived governance failures. Authors of this article follow this approach by emphasizing the specific of leadership in the public sector.

According to Tummers and Knies (2013), public sector organisations demonstrate a higher level of change leadership than expected. Scientists' conclusions show that public sector organisations may not be as bureaucratic as it is generally considered and that some organisations have had few bureaucratic features. . Constructional features such as distribution of hierarchical power, strict formalisation through rules and regulations, dependence on downward (and limited upward and (or) lateral) communication, hinder the need as well as the potential of transformational management. Firstly, they reduce the need for leadership to provide sufficient indications how to direct employees' behaviour. Secondly, they also reduce opportunities to lead, limit leader's ability to act in new ways or to present an attractive vision, to reinterpret organisational aims more compatible with employees' values. This becomes very serious barrier, because legal limitations on leaders' freedom to make decisions affects the quality of services and management in the context of uncertainty conditions (such as COVID-19 pandemic). Moreover, during the pandemic it was found out that strong leadership really matters to deal with all raised challenges (Wilson, 2020). Besides, changing environment requires for innovations in the public sector constantly, which usually cover new or significant changes of services, changes in activities' processes, organisational methods, and communication with service users (Demircioglu and Audretsch, 2017). These changes affect the leadership processes despite of pandemic or regular period.

Scientific literature claims that leadership is defined as a manifold concept that depends on content and context. Researchers usually define leadership following their own individual research perspectives and aspects of the phenomenon they are interested in. The author of change leadership theory Burns (1978) distinguished two types of leadership: transactional and transformational (Burnes et al., 2018). Transactional leadership is related to majority of leadership models where emphasis is laid on exchanges between leaders and followers. Transformational leadership is the process when a person creates a connection with others that increases motivation and morality of the leader and the follower. The research on change leadership by Holen and Jenssen (2018) showed that transformational management style has a positive relationship with organisational changes. According to Kareem and Kin (2018), change leadership determines the direction and involves formation of essential strategies necessary for achieving organisation's vision. The authors emphasised that the key role of a change leader is to challenge the status quo; thus, leadership has to be understood in the context of changes. From a broader perspective, leadership is a dynamic process where a leader and followers interact in the way that generates changes. In the period of change, changes are very important referring to employee's behaviour as they have impact on motivation, productivity and activities (Deschamps et al., 2016).

Change leadership is also called transformational leadership because it inspires the followers to change their provisions and behaviour, to combine personal and organisation's aims. Ability to combine individual and organisational interests plaid a crucial role when pandemic situation required employees of municipal administration to act under new rules, schedules and even new formed organisational culture (Toleikienė et al., 2020). Change leadership is related to leadership concept through the fact that leadership is the key factor making significant influence on the success of the efforts of any organisation or individual. Bass and Riggio (2006) emphasise the model of change leadership that contains transformational, transactional and laissez-faire leadership styles, has the strongest theoretical substantiation and has been widely researched and favourably evaluated among change leadership researchers and practitioners.

Considering the concepts, transformational leadership and change leadership are very similar theories related to each other through creation of a vision, leadership and orientation to change implementation (Khan et al., 2016). Transformational leadership style is based on morality, covers four components essential for the activities and composes "4I" model, which consists of idealised influence, inspiring motivation, intellectual stimulation and individualised attention (Khan et al., 2016; Eide et al., 2020; Siangchokyoo et al., 2020). "Inspiring motivation" is a degree to which a leader articulates the vision that is attractive and inspires employees. Leaders challenge the employees to pursue high standards, convey optimism regarding future goals and give the meaning to a particular

goal, inspire team spirit. Samanta and Lamprakis (2018) emphasise that through their behaviour such leaders inspire their followers and make them feel they are doing valuable and meaningful work. "Intellectual stimulation" is a degree to which a leader overcomes established provisions, takes risk and asks employees to give ideas. Intellectual stimulation is expressed by an ability to make the followers look at the problems differently (Sánchez-Cardona et al., 2018). Transformational leaders stimulate and support employees' creativity, independent thinking, education and development. New ideas are very welcome and the leader does not criticise the followers that their ideas or attitudes are different from the leader's (Bass, Riggio, 2006). "Idealised influence" can be described as a role's model which is characterised by ethical behaviour, respectability, respect and trust. Transformational leaders behave in the way that they become an example for the followers (Mokhber et al., 2018). Such leaders take personal risks and this a rule rather than an exception, such leaders follow very strict ethical and moral requirements avoiding to use their powers for personal interests (Holen, Jenssen, 2018). Finally, the "individualised attention" is the degree that the leader considers employees' needs, acts as a mentor or educator, and listens to employees' concerns. This element covers need for respect, it is acknowledged that every person can contribute to the common team's work. Dougal, Lewis and Ross (2018) emphasise that transformational changes are defined as the occurrence of a completely new state, stimulated by the change of what is considered possible or necessary and this is conditioned by a completely different structure, culture or level of performance.

More complicated implementation of changes in organisations is determined by specific features of public organisations. Van der Voet (2016) indicates that public sector organisations must constantly change and implement changes; however, this contradicts to their traditional role while providing reliable and steady services. In the innovation or change process, employees have to use their competencies and demonstrate discretionary behavior, which shapes their innovative work behavior and helps organizations meet new changes in a volatile environment (Javed et al., 2018). Public sector leaders must carefully prepare for any organizational change and to make sure employees acknowledge change benefit, otherwise, "internal contradictions can strike staff organizational identity, and employees adjust to a situation they are critical of with showing false support" (Židonis, Raišienė, 2020).

Bouckaert et al. (2020) explained that majority of European countries and their governments were unprepared for COVID-19. Some countries (like Australia, Taiwan) managed with the crisis in a quite short period because of the previous experiences (Moloney, Moloney, 2020), some (like Norway) - because of administrative capacity and legitimacy (Christensen, Laegreid, 2020), others - because of experience in crisis communication, shared learning competencies and collaboration practices (Dzigbede et al., 2020). However, majority of countries had to learn some lessons. Lithuanian municipalities presented economic policy measures for residents and businesses to promote employment, productivity, economic development, and ensure biosecurity (Dvorak, 2021). Therefore, decentralization, financial condition, administrative capacity, regulatory framework and path dependency were main factors, which had to be projected into concrete adaptation strategies by local government leaders (Plaček et al., 2020).

As the COVID-19 pandemic became a huge challenge for majority of public sector organisations, the self-government institutions met this period with high level of uncertainty and the presence of negative emotions of employees, therefore, this time of change proved that the leaders of self-government institutions must develop their skills to manage the crisis and build the trust of their employees (Skorková et al., 2020). The pandemic period and the established quarantine required leaders of municipal administration to act under requirements of reimagined change leadership: to communicate with the broad interest groups of society and institutions; to collaborate seeking for common quick decisions; to become personal examples of ethical behaviour for employees; to formulate very clear tasks and to get the informative responses of employees; to be a leader and a manager at once, able promptly to find answers and make decisions (Burnes et al., 2018; Toleikienė et al., 2020).

Moreover, the leadership in municipal administration is constantly influenced by the environmental (political, legal, social, economic and technological) factors. Therefore, empirical researches, revealing features of change leadership in the particular country in the current situation, are needed. Just having main insights of the current situation researchers may provide some assumptions of strengthening change leadership in local self-government institutions.

## **Methods of the research**

Research methodology is based on exploratory research approach and qualitative strategy of case analysis research. Case analysis allowed to deeper understand the contextuality of the analysed object, to illustrate how change leadership manifests itself in local self-government institution in case of emergency (COVID-19 pandemic). According to Swedberg (2020) the exploratory study aims to get some knowledge and come up with new ideas, therefore, a small sample is justified in such a case. Therefore, researchers, using the method of criteria selection (social-economic parameters, such as number of citizens in the municipality, GDP per capita, FDI per capita, etc.), have selected Kelmė district municipality for a case study. Due to the small sample (exploratory approach), it is impossible to generalise research results, however, findings are significant as an information source for future

researches and for better understanding of the particular phenomenon of change leadership in Lithuanian municipal administrations under conditions of change and uncertainty.

The method of semi-structured interview has been selected for qualitative research which aimed to reveal the peculiarities of dynamics of change leadership in municipal administration in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Referring to the elements of change leadership model "4I", presented by Bass and Riggio (2006), the questionnaire guidelines (the research instrument) have been prepared, including 19 questions on inspiring motivation, intellectual stimulation, idealised influence, individualised attention and demographic issues.

The sampling was made using the method of the criteria selection (leading position in the municipal administration of the selected municipality; leading position both in pre-pandemic and pandemic period; not less than 3 years of experience in leading position). Six interviewees, representing top and middle level managers of municipal administration, have been selected and participated in the empirical research. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, quarantine was announced and a large number of employees worked remotely or from home, therefore, interviews were also organised remotely - by phone (no possibilities for face-to-face interviews). The duration of one interview was 45-60 minutes. The obtained data of qualitative research were processed applying the method of content analysis (categorization and interpretation).

The research was carried out on March and April, 2020. The research was carried out following research ethics requirements (signed consent of municipal administration director with the permission to conduct interviews, agreement with participants in advance, voluntary participation, respect, openness, honesty of researchers, etc.). In order to ensure the confidentiality, answers of interviewees were codified I1–I6, where "I" means the "interviewee" and the number means the order of interviews.

## Research finding and discussion

While analysing change leadership in municipal administration in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, first of all authors of this article tried to find out *the load on organisation's leaders during the pandemic*. Referring to the answers presented by the interviewees, authors state that in case of an emergency the biggest burden falls on the leaders. The interviewees indicated that in case of emergency due to the pandemic and quarantine in the municipality, the activities are organised twenty-four hours a day:

*The workload has increased significantly <...> [I1]; this is practically 24 hours a day [I2]; I suppose it is the biggest during all the years I've been working [I3]; I think bigger <...> [I4]; There are neither working hours nor how much work you have to do that day [I6].*

Managers' work load increases and working hours are not counted as it is necessary to answer phone calls, to consult, make decisions "here and now" because often the decisions are made first and only later government recommendations are obtained. The same results about increased workload in municipal administration were obtained by other researches (Toleikienė et al., 2020). Consequently, in emergency situations leaders follow the principle that all work must be done, at the same time showing inspiring motivation to the employees so that teams could work all together faster and more effectively. This feature is related to the conception of change leadership.

While analysing *the influence of constant changes on the manager* it has been determined that constant changes make both favourable and unfavourable influence. In case of heavy workload due to constant changes, it is difficult for the managers to make decisions, it causes anxiety:

*It complicates manager's work, therefore, his behaviour undoubtedly changes <...> [I1]; <...> distracts more and finds solutions harder <...> [I1]; <...> changes do not allow to fall asleep, you have always remain on a standby mode <...> [I5].*

Such interviewees' attitude may be explained by work intensity, manager's unpreparedness to perform several activities simultaneously, employees' disability to adapt to the requirements which also influences decision-making. However, some interviewees on the contrary stated that constant changes help the managers to preserve tactful and calm approach:

*If the manager is stable mentally, he will cope with any changes <...> [I3]; <...> there are different kinds of managers, some have weaker nerves, some do not control their emotions and especially <...> [I2]; <...> to calm down people and to provide such conditions that they could work without stress [I6].*

This issue closely connects to the idea of ethical leadership which includes the openness of a leader to accept mistakes of employees and, despite of existing occupational stress, to demonstrate the normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships (Haque and Yamoah, 2021).

One of the most often emphasised successful change factors is the role of the manager: his personal abilities, preparedness, constant learning and sharing, knowledge and experience (Videikienė, Šimanskienė, 2013; Toleikienė et al., 2020; Switzer et al., 2020). Manager must inform and persuade employees and other interested parties regarding the inevitability of changes, identify and be able to take necessary degree of risk, evaluate the

ways and means of overcoming the risk, be able to adapt to new circumstances. Thus, some managers are able to evaluate changes, to manage emotions and to persuade employees to work. Therefore, authors state that the aspects of inspirational motivation can be attributed to such managers.

Some interviewees indicated that constant changes expand leaders' outlook:

*The outlook is expanded [14]; Changes only the workload, type of work because more work has to be done during a short period of time [16].*

Hence, constant renewal and implementation of changes not only change the nature of work but also increase personal qualification providing conditions to feel better and enjoy the results of work and activities.

During the interview, researchers tried to find out *the changes that most often occur in the activities of municipal administration*. While analysing the respondents' answers it has been determined that most often changes are implemented in the spheres of social security and education:

*There are changes in social sphere, in the specifics of social support [13]; the Department of Social Support <...> perhaps meeting the needs of the old people and those who encounter various problems [14]; To my mind in social sphere <...> [15].*

The implementation of these changes is influenced by the need to take care of all people, residents of the district and their future. Consequently, social support, social services and education can be distinguished as priority spheres in the activities of municipal administration of Kelmė district. The interviewees' attitude that changes are necessary in many spheres:

*In all our surroundings, infrastructure, because again, if there were requirements for streets, water management projects, recreation parks <...> [11]; Services that we used to provide earlier, usually here in place, now are also provided electronically... [16]; <...> in document management <...> [11].*

It is confirmed by their responses that the changes are usually implemented in the activities that are mainly related to ICT installation:

*Changes are usually implemented in the spheres related to ICT [13]; <...> how to carry out this distance training to make it really useful to their community [14].*

The similar implications of enhanced importance of ICT in leadership processes and daily activity at local self-government during the pandemic were provided by other researchers (Toleikienė et al., 2020). Hence, increasing opportunities to move various activities and documents to electronic space make presumptions and possibilities for changes. According to the interviewees, changes are also influenced by updated legislation:

*Usually there is legislation that must be implemented [13]; <...> to my mind, most changes are in social sphere <...> because there are many changes in legislation [13]; <...> in social sphere, as mentioned before, transformation is in process <...> [15]".*

This requires changes for its implementation. For instance, reception of people and services provided to them in many municipalities are renewed due to new opportunities to provide services online. Therefore, it may be stated that opportunity of installation of electronic services stimulates constant changes and improvement of activities.

Modern society in everyday activities encounter various threats. Threat is a potential source of damage to the state, community, people as well as the environment, private and public property, infrastructure and business, traditional system of the governance (Survila, Valickas, 2015; Shaw et al., 2020). Today the situation in Lithuania and around the world is not an exception – emergency due to the threat of the COVID-19 pandemic, therefore, article authors tried to find out *how unexpected changes are managed in the municipal administration*. While analysing interviewees' responses it has been determined that in case of emergency situation the groups of qualified specialists are invited, emergency commissions are formed in order to make decisions focusing on the situation:

*We form the commissions, the more heads, the better [11]; <...> we create the groups of competent people, we meet them, have discussions [15]; Work group is created, specialists of various spheres are involved [13]; Unexpected or expected changes - all of them are discussed [16]; there is an emergency commission as well as the operations' centre [12].*

The interviewees have indicated that qualified specialists are consulted because emergency managers must identify all threats: both the most expected and the most devastating. It is clear that it is impossible to plan and prevent all unexpected events, therefore, the greatest focus must be concentrated on the threats that cause the most undesirable consequences in the socioeconomic and cultural context (Survila, Valickas, 2015; Arias-Maldonado, 2020). Thus, such attitude that the situation is analysed by people who understand the essence and threat of extreme situations may be evaluated favourably since specialists' help is significant in order to make less mistakes while solving the situation.

According to the interviewees, in case of an emergency, quick response to the situation is important as well as

prompt decision making:

*<...> what is not regulated by the law we try to solve immediately, to discuss and make decision in order to improve the situation and get out of such condition [I1]; Besides, we consult, discuss and solve various problems here and now [I4]; <...> parallel agreements that also provide responsibility allow to implement trust <...> [I5].*

Therefore, authors may presume that prompt response and ability to find a solution as soon as possible are very important while demonstrating influence on the employees.

At the end of the interview, authors tried to identify *what leader's personal qualities are significant and necessary for implementation of changes*. The analysis of interviewees' responses revealed very few leader's qualities necessary for implementation of changes. Thus, while implementing changes leader has to be insightful in order to be able to evaluate the situation that will occur after implementation of changes and to properly coordinate implementation of these changes:

*<...> insight is necessary, the ability to foresee several steps forward [I1]; In fact, to foresee changes, not to float downstream [I4].*

The demand to learn how to manage virtual teams raised in the beginning of pandemic as it is different than managing employees in a traditional face-to-face office environment (Newman, Ford, 2021). It is also very important that the leader who implements changes would be a part of a team and would work together, would be able to coordinate the team work, to take some functions:

*In our team I am not alone, there are four of us, therefore it is very important to make a mutual decision [I2]; <...> team management and finding compromises [I3].*

The interviewees' attitude acknowledges Sánchez-Cardona et al. (2018), who emphasised the importance of learning in a team. According to them, working in a team, using intellectual simulation the manager "improves" employees getting interested in their problems, increasing their ability to consider the problems from a new perspective. Determination and responsibility are also very important for implementation of changes:

*Determination is necessary. Determination to implement this thing and to take the responsibility [I5]; Leader needs determination as well as to take responsibility [I6].*

Such interviewees' attitudes show that a leader is important during the change period not as commanding and giving instructions manager but as a team member who shares activities and responsibility.

While defining change leadership the interviewees emphasise the importance of anticipating future actions as well as learning and improving. Anticipation of actions may be related to managers' future vision. The managers indicated that they feel the impact of constant change. Changes force to move, they stimulate; constant learning, improvement during change period are highlighted. However, during the change period, decisions are more difficult to make. The interviewees indicated that it is important for the manager to have leader's characteristics necessary to perform majority of functions and especially to make decisions. The managers emphasise that employees' attitude towards change is different: some accept, others – resist. It depends upon the circumstances, context, and personal qualities. According to the interviewees, at present emergency situation is emphasised, the solution of today's problems remains the most important aim in implementing the change. The team coordinates decision making and tries to react promptly to the problem. Unexpected changes increase managers' work load, the activities are organised twenty-four hours a day. This shows that managers of municipal administration flexibly react to current events. These insights supports findings of other studies such as Plaček et al. (2020), Toileikienė et al. (2020), Homeniuk et al. (2020).

While analysing interviewees' responses it has been determined that in the analysed case most often the changes are implemented in the spheres of social security and education. This is influenced by the legislation requirements, the need to renew the opportunities of activities in various spheres, while implementing IT, the services are transferred to the electronic space. According to the managers, the sphere of document management requires changes.

Summarizing research results authors of this article state that managers of Lithuanian municipal administration during the COVID-19 pandemic act as change leaders demonstrating the elements of transformational leadership such as inspiring motivation and idealised influence, encouraging the followers to learn constantly, working in a team.

## Conclusions

Theoretical conception of change leadership in local self-government is influenced by conditions of emergency (such as COVID-19 pandemic). Change leadership in public sector for a long period was explained as a complex combination that shows leaders' skills and outcomes and politicians and bureaucrats at the same time perform their responsibility and duties accordingly. In order to successfully implement changes, managers distinguish the

following leader's characteristics: insight, anticipation of opportunities, determination, taking responsibility, belonging to a team. Constant and extreme changes modify managers' behaviour, decisions are made harder; however, managing unexpected changes is carried out in a team. This is reflected by the "4I" model's element "inspiring motivation". Managers personal qualities such as determination and taking responsibility, insight, significant and quick reaction to the situation, prompt decision making have great influence on implementation of changes. The "4I" model's element "idealised influence" is demonstrated through personal example and personal qualities. Therefore, the change leadership in local self-government should be strengthened on both individual and organisational level. Change leaders must strengthen their competence and knowledge on how to manage the personal influence and how to motivate the virtual team to work towards organisational goals even under conditions of uncertainty. While municipalities as organisations must provide timely institutional support with the legal basis, technological measures and equipment, and training programmes, needed to keep the high level of readiness to respond to emergencies.

During the COVID-19 pandemic the change leadership became inseparable practice in the Lithuanian municipal administration. Managers' work load increased, activities are organised twenty-four hours a day. In municipal administration most often changes are implemented in the spheres of social security and education, because the COVID-19 pandemic affected the most vulnerable society sections. In addition, in the spheres related to IT implementation due to pandemic many activities such as meetings or learning were transferred to virtual space. Changes are influenced by changing Lithuanian national legislation in response to the emergency.

Research empirical results allow to form and present the following assumptions of change leadership in Lithuanian municipal administrations, which may be useful for the analysis and creation of possibilities, strengthening the change leadership in public sector organizations (especially local self-government institutions):

- *To form management culture* focused on ability to manage unexpected changes ensuring stability and continuity of the activities. The results of qualitative research have revealed that during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic, managers have to have abilities necessary for change leaders to create a favourable environment for changes and management culture of the organisation based on cooperation.
- *To develop leadership and management competences.* In the Lithuania's progress strategy "Lithuania 2030" the need for changes in local self-government institutions is emphasised, necessity to develop leadership and management competences in local self-government institutions in order to ensure high quality services that would satisfy service users' needs is highlighted. The research showed that the departments of municipal administration are open to competent implementation of the newest government decrees and seek to renew in the spheres under reform.
- *The requirements of management transparency and prompt response to emergency situations* create a need to publicize more actively information in public space and to transfer more operational functions to electronic space. The research revealed that information publicity becomes especially important during emergency situations while ensuring the principles of transparency, openness and accountability. Transference of many activities and services into electronic space is considered as organisation's change that requires innovative attitude and personal development of the manager.
- *To constantly develop and strengthen change leadership competences* in an organisation. Employees need new competences and skills in order to be able to provide citizens quality service. Research results as well as scientific literary analysis confirm that employees' attitude towards changes are different: some accept them, the others – resist. Everything depends upon specialist's personal qualities and leader's ability to "lead forward". Managers have more responsibilities such as change initiation, their management, motivation of employees, therefore, it is necessary to develop and strengthen change leadership competences in an organisation.

This research has some limitations, connected to its explorative origin and the chosen research strategy of a case study. This strategy does not provide possibility to generalise research findings for all municipalities, however, it contributes significantly by new knowledge and ideas, leading to the better understanding of the change leadership phenomenon at local self-government. Limitations of this research provides some ideas for future research directions. Future research could develop further insights of the change leadership in municipal administration by conducting the comparative research of similar municipalities in several European countries. Moreover, the research could become the longitudinal one to follow the development of change management over an extended period of time (especially focusing on changes in public sector leadership inspired by the changing situation of the COVID-19 pandemic).

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