e-Leadership during COVID-19: Challenges for Municipal Administration Employees

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Abstract: e-Leadership was a practice of the business sector and just recently it found the applicability in organizations of the public sector. For a long period e-leadership was rather a random case than a common practice in municipalities. Covid-19 pandemic has affected the change of organizational practices globally, forcing even municipal administrations to look for ICT tools helping them to keep their internal processes continuing. Laws and regulations have been changed to legalize remote work, therefore, e-leadership as a common practice gained the peak of practical importance. The aim of the article is to reveal main challenges of e-leadership for municipal administration employees during Covid-19. The article is based on the summarizing of empirical results of the case study, conducted in Lithuanian municipal administration. The sudden turn to e-leadership required leaders and employees of municipal administration to adapt new tools, time planning and working culture, which had some positive and negative effects on leaders and employees in municipal administrations. It influenced the decrease of time wasting, increased rational and targeted communication, and the careful and trustful control of tasks' implementation. On the other hand, the changed situation and leadership methods had a negative impact on the psychology of employees (constant tense and uncertainty), increased work-life imbalance, etc.

1 INTRODUCTION

E-leadership as the phenomenon was caused by the development of information and communication technologies (hereinafter ICT) and their integration to various organizational processes (including relations between the leader and employees). E-leadership is understood as the leadership of employees using digital, virtual channels and media, such as e-mail, video conferencing and virtual task implementation platforms (Lexa, 2021). Social influence on employees and such processes as communication, motivation, transmission of values and formation of attitudes, influenced by the leader, are going using ICT (Avolio et al., 2014; Kahai et al., 2017; Van Wart et al., 2019). It started the existence in business companies (Torre, Sarti, 2020), which were quite open for different ways of acting to reach their goals, enabling the remote work as acceptable form, and it has reached its popularity in the period of Covid-19 pandemic in all sectors, including the public one.

Due to legal regulations, the traditional way of the performance (face-to-face) in municipal administrations was a common practice. Integration of ICT was gaining popularity in relations between governmental organizations and clients (citizens, institutions or business companies) - e-democracy, e-government, e-services, e-citizen, etc. (Twizeyimana, Andersson, 2019). However, the organizational process of leadership was based on the direct communication between the leader and employees.

The Covid-19 pandemic made a huge impact and it has affected the change of organizational practices globally, forcing organizations to look for ICT tools helping them to keep their performance continuing. In the majority of cases, the public sector organizations (including municipalities) had to change their regulations to legalize remote work. As the pandemic period was challenging, the e-leadership process has been expanded and it had a huge effect on employees' working style, communication and even motivation. As there is still a lack of scientific knowledge about how the

pandemic has affected the leadership in public sector organizations (especially, municipal administrations), this research has been conducted.

The aim of this article is to reveal main challenges of e-leadership for municipal administration employees during Covid-19. The qualitative research was based on the case study (in Lithuanian municipal administration). Due to limitations of the article scope, it presents just summarized results of the research

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

To analyze challenges of e-leadership on employees during the Covid-19, e-leadership phenomenon has to be explained and its specifics in municipal administration identified.

2.1 The Concept of e-Leadership

e-Leadership refers to leadership processes, including communication, social influence and motivation, through ICT (Van Wart et al., 2019; Avolio et al. 2014). The leader and employees use ICT for the communication as well as for the collection and dissemination of information, required to support organizational duties, tasks' implementation, monitoring and controlling (DasGupta, 2011).

e-Leadership focuses on personal traits and social skills, such as willingness to learn and relearn, responsiveness, honesty, interaction, and trust-building, etc., e-leaders have to possess (Annunzio, 2001; Savolaine, 2013). Leaders play several roles in an organization: interpersonal roles (the head figure, leading person (directing, ordering, guiding, etc.), liaison); decision making roles (entrepreneur, disturbance handler, resource allocator, negotiator); informational roles (monitor and denominator, spokesperson) (Satriadi, Agusven, 2021). In the context of ICT usage, e-leaders must focus on such roles as: visionary (seeing the big picture and translating it to organization, representing the organization in public), convener (managing differences of a team and bringing towards clear goads and decisions, solving conflicts), manager (allocating organizational resources with responsibility, ensuring the supply of needed equipment for employees), sponsor (forming and directing real and virtual teams), innovator (finding new ways or tools of working), and mentor (guiding and directing prospects of new leaders, showing the personal example, encouraging others to use ICT) (Satriadi, Agusven, 2021; Venus et al., 2019; Ford et al., 2017; Han et al., 2020).

According to Montgomery et al. (2016), e-leadership is affected by some factors such as leader's characteristics, situational factors, virtual design characteristics, subordinate characteristics, task characteristics, alignment with ethical values and citizen trust, legal basis and requirements on the performance of the sector. Therefore, specifics of the work in municipal administration may affect the success of e-leadership in it.

2.2 Specifics of e-Leadership in a Municipal Administration

Municipality as the governmental institution is considered to be the closest one to citizens. Every decision is reviewed by community members or organizations, discussed in public. So even internal processes such as leadership are monitored. Turning to e-leadership requires special attentiveness and responsibility, ensuring the continuity of the performance as well as satisfaction of citizens' expectations on effective and trustful management of human resources in the municipality. Municipal administration has to be prepared to respond to any challenge (Bryson et al., 2014) and to continue its activity even under circumstances of uncertainty or crisis.

It has to perform in the context of dichotomy of politics and administration (Overeem, 2005). Therefore, even internal processes such as leadership and e-leadership may be affected by conditions and requirements of both - policy making and policy implementation structures. Besides, as the governmental institution it has less possibilities to be flexible and adapt new practices even to internal processes (in majority of cases, any change has to be approved by some entities or regulations). The bureaucratic tradition of public administration (strict rules, limited managerial flexibility, steady and routine processes) may impede the e-leadership (more flexible, innovative, non-traditional way of acting) acceptance as the normal practice in the municipality.

The cyber security can become another challenge for e-leadership in municipalities, especially in the crisis-induced situation, since social networks, free software and open source have become popular instruments for management processes in public administration, with local public administrations

rapidly becoming an attractive target for cybercriminals (Montgomery et al., 2016).

E-leadership in municipal administration may be affected by some challenges, which are similar to those from other sectors. E-leaders are expected to work openly, inspire individuals and teams to mobilize, concentrate on problems and results, guide rather than control, and concentrate on motivating rather than directing; they have to find effective ways to manage the collaboration and communication between team members, to develop employees' self-management capabilities, to solve interpersonal conflicts, to deal with isolation and confusion of employees (DasGupta, 2011; Kapucu, Ustun, 2018).

Leaders are dependent on getting institutional support, such as needed equipment and license, training, decision support system, and simulation (Van Wart et al., 2017) to improve their ICT usage and decision making skills, especially in the crisis context. The lack of such institutional support may become one more challenge for e-leadership in the crisis-induced situation.

Consequently, it should be emphasized that e-leadership in municipalities can be affected by various tensions connected to the nature of public administration and challenges rising due to human-machine interactions.

3 EMPIRICAL RESULTS

The analysis of the e-leadership practice in a particular public administration institution under the real crisis-induced situation may reveal what kind of additional challenges the e-leadership has for municipal administration employees. Therefore, qualitative research in Lithuanian municipality as a case study was conducted.

3.1 Method of the Research

Seeking to disclose the real situation of e-leadership practice in municipal administration, the empirical research as a case study (a qualitative research strategy) has been chosen. Two semi-structured interviews with two representatives of municipal administration in Lithuania (both in supervisory positions, the second interviewee has changed her position from an employee to a vice-chairperson of the section just recently) were conducted during the pandemic situation in July 2020. It was a part of a bigger research project, conducted in 2019-2020, so interviews were the follow-up type. The interview

guide (the research instrument) was validated before and it focused on leadership processes under conditions of teleworking and changes in leadership experienced by municipal employees. Both interviews took place face-to face in the offices of the interviewees. Both interviewed persons represented one Lithuanian medium-size municipality that was selected purposefully because in 2015 it was acknowledged as the most successful municipality implementing e-democracy in Lithuania (Information Society Development Committee, 2015). Their recordings were transcribed. The summarizing results of this research are presented in this article.

3.2 Results of the Case Study

3.2.1 Specifics of e-Leadership in Lithuanian Municipal Administration

The Covid-19 pandemic situation has changed the work of the municipal administration fundamentally.

During the quarantine, the form of teleworking became mandatory for all municipal employees in a very short two-week period. This was stressful for the employees, as they had to learn to use various e-tools (platforms) on their own to guarantee the smooth operation of organizational duties. Employees had to learn new ICT tools in a very short period too. Due to the lack of timely institutional support, they became self-taught experts of some tools and even consulted each other. Leaders had to transfer the leadership process online and to start guiding virtual teams. They had to master ICT specific tools, quite new in their daily performance, and to become mentors (examples and guides) for their employees.

It should be emphasized that during the pandemic, the attitude of municipal leaders towards the form of teleworking changed significantly. It became clear that it is not as a privilege or a non-effective time, but just another way of working. This has increased the mutual trust between leaders and employees; it helped to transfer the greater responsibility and autonomy for employees, and increased their self-confidence. Employees accepted teleworking as the only way to continue their duties in the crisis context. Leaders had to adapt to the role of the mentor or guide rather than to stay the main leading (head) person.

During this period, the municipal agenda was complemented by "extra" issues that had to be addressed "here and now". Leaders and employees of the municipal administration had to solve them in a

short time by adopting non-standard decisions requiring team approach and responsibility. Virtual teams were organized for the search, adoption and implementation of solutions, consultations and collective decision making. Leaders had to develop competences needed to become good conveners and sponsors.

Such a situation required greater planning, time management from leaders as well as from employees. During the quarantine, there was an agreement between leaders and employees that everyone should be available all the time, thus extending working hours to 24/7. The purpose of this agreement was the need to respond quickly to "extra" (unplanned) issues and the need for urgent decisions. Moreover, such a requirement has helped to address the issue of employees' control. Leaders even preferred to organize meetings in the very early morning or late evening, on weekends to avoid problems of internet connection overloads (so they have improved their managing skills). Employees accepted this new organizational behavior due to perceived complexity of the situation. They started to plan their free time according to new rules, even though it has increased the work-life imbalance.

Responsibilities of different departments have been redistributed: some departments worked minimally because their activities were suspended, others - worked day and night. During the quarantine, there were a number of cases, when heads of other administrative divisions (leaders) helped for other leaders and took additional activities and functions (not provided in the terms of their responsibilities). So, leaders accepted new circumstances as the need to show their organizational citizenship. Those personal examples inspired other employees to help colleagues too.

Working places moved to employees' homes, and it caused additional challenges for employees and leaders, structuring the rhythm of the work. The Covid-19 pandemic situation forced the Government to close many organizations, including schools. Teleworking from home has been hampered by the coordination of family members' working and studying activities, the need for support to children for their distance learning and the lack of suitable ICT equipment. Parents (employees) had to develop their competencies of time planning as well as multitasking to do their operational tasks on time and to take care of home duties. Leaders had to become more patient and understanding as the majority of them struggled with the same issues at home.

Leaders moved to constant performance of multi-tasking. This required them to pay more attention

(and time) to the detailed and clear content of the task, delivered to the employee. Therefore, the competences of good communication (a spokesperson) had to be improved.

Leaders even started to use multiple devices at once to satisfy the need of participation in several activities (meetings with other leaders, Government representatives or even politicians, members of the municipal council), to become fully reachable in a case of "extra" issues. In the very beginning of the quarantine, they had to look for best ICT tools and platforms to work with their virtual teams, as the institutional support came just later. So, they had to strengthen their role as innovators.

Such a drastic change has raised some psychological issues for employees too. The stress caused by the isolation and the lack of live communication has manifested in a form of the willingness to talk to colleagues (on the phone) for longer than usual, expressions of emotions (including negative ones) and fears. As a result, leaders had to spend more time listening to employees and motivating them to perform assigned activities. This required them to strengthen competences and to enable their roles of the convener and mentor. Moreover, colleagues had to find ways to help each other psychologically too as the implementation of the majority of tasks were dependent on the readiness to act of all employees.

4 CONCLUSIONS

E-leadership as the process of social influence towards employees using ICT in the public sector is multidimensional. E-leadership in municipal administrations can be affected by various tensions connected to the nature of public administration and challenges rising due to human-machine as well as interpersonal interactions.

During the Covid-19 the performance of employees (both leaders and their team members) in Lithuanian municipal administration and the practice of e-leadership was affected by some challenges:

☐ organizational challenges: changes of regulations on teleworking; unplanned relocation of activities to virtual space; acquisition and development of ICT, adapted for teleworking; (non)organizing of training for employees on the management of new ICT tools and programs; new rules for the administration of activities under conditions of uncertainty;

☐ job-based challenges: between leaders and employees: increased level of uncertainty of cared-

out activities; creation of new traditions (work rhythm, routine, activity structuring); greater concentration to deal with crisis situations; increased working days and hours; making quick decisions "here and now"; deterioration of emotional health;

☐ leadership-based challenges: more emphasis on task delivery; the need for better planning of time and tasks working from home; constant multi-tasking; better management of e-meetings' flow.

The sudden turn (on a broad scale) to e-leadership due to Covid-19 pandemic had both positive and negative effects in the municipal administration. It has led to a more efficient time use, as perceived by the study participants, and increased the rational and targeted communication between leaders and employees. It has encouraged careful, but trustful control of tasks' implementation. On the other hand, the changed situation and leadership methods had a negative impact on employees: it increased the work-life imbalance, the constant tense and uncertainty has increased psychological issues, which had to be handled with the support from leaders as well as colleagues.

The research has some limitations. As the empirical research (case study) is based on few interviews that have been conducted in one Lithuanian municipality, results cannot be generalized. However, results contribute to the better understanding of the e-leadership phenomenon and challenges of municipal administration employees in the context of Covid-19 pandemic.

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