

Leading collaborative change amid a crisis: a framework to liberate a team's leadership skills and promote sales performance

Leadership
framework for
change amid a
crisis

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to introduce an alternative model, “volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (VUCA), Virtue and Vice” (3V's), to unleash leadership skills, promote organisational collaborative change and impact sales performance during an unprecedented crisis.

Design/methodology/approach – The methodology outlines action research based on the 3V's model and its application in an international business-to-business sales organisation during Covid-19. It explores alternative paths informed by play-at-work and Plato's philosophy applied to work-based-learning. Each action/iteration adds to the model, which becomes more likely appropriate for various situations.

Findings – The 3V's boosted change implementation and improved sales performance. The 3V's conceptualised an invitation to immerse oneself in the constant “river of change” (VUCA) and a means of understanding the role of leadership in navigating this change by embracing simple rules: searching for justice (Virtue) and overcoming the barrier of public opinion (Vice).

Research limitations/implications – The 3V's model is grounded in leadership literature and a sole application, providing real international data relevant to organisations and leaders. This has yet to be evaluated further.

Practical implications – 3V's can enhance the understanding of a leading collaborative change and re-frame team dynamics in post-pandemic times for the broader public.

Social implications – The approach advocated is a practice of “swimming alongside the team”, which should enable empowerment and collaboration rather than a top-down direction. Focussing on leaders who are moral people, this approach becomes a differentiator in a digital world.

Originality/value – This study examines Plato's philosophy, play-at-work and other leadership theories in a model which prepares organisations to respond to crisis by providing the ability to reflect on human aspects and straightforward, transferable skills.

Keywords Collaborative change, Crisis, Play-at-work, Leadership, Plato, Work-applied learning, Self-determination theory, VUCA, Sales transformation

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Organisations are rarely prepared for a crisis, and there is not enough time available when the crisis occurs for organisational leaders to craft and then execute an appropriate response strategy. Since organisations will experience a crisis at some point, they need to know how to respond to it in advance (Bowers *et al.*, 2017). Therefore, an alternative leadership framework

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is required, one which adds a “wide range of perspectives, practices, and provocations in line with a more pluralistic notion of impact, and the areas of debate above” (Wall, 2017, p. 90). Such a framework might help us to understand how change occurs with no warning and consequently impacts sales performance: the framework is designed to help organisations ready themselves to respond to any crisis.

Early 2020 saw the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. Research found that companies had to rethink key elements of their practice to maintain operations, including technology, safety and the creation of work environments that could be both productive and enjoyable (Stalmachova *et al.*, 2022; Bennett, 2021; Ashkenas, 2020; Dwivedi *et al.*, 2020). It also found that employee morale was affected because sales had been severely impacted. Similarly, customers exhibited survival behaviour, with consumers returning to trusted brands and not risking new ventures (McKinsey, 2020). Many organisations missed strategic sales targets for the first time in decades (Luu, 2021). As organisations evolve, they strive to change in response to circumstances, yet most studies show a 60–70% failure rate for organisational change projects (Ashkenas, 2020; Burnes, 2011). Moreover, the pandemic exposed and heightened contradictions, dilemmas and tensions within organisations. Responses to Covid-19 included emergency decision-making and limiting social and economic activities (Kraus *et al.*, 2020; Walby, 2022).

Considering leadership as “an observable pattern of practices and behaviours and a definable set of skills and abilities” (Kouzes and Posner, 2017, p. 302), the author had harboured a concern about how to develop a framework for unleashing people’s potential to become sales leaders and impact sales results in times of crisis. Drawing on Garnett *et al.* (2016), this paper argues that the major strategy change in organisations is predicated on an organisation’s capability to learn and then apply that learning strategically. Learning, in the context of this paper, does not belong exclusively to individuals, but emerges from collaborative relationships (Jones *et al.*, 2019; Critten, 2016; Burnes, 2011; Habermas, 1984).

The author’s project focussed on an international sales organisation’s vision of consistently exceeding customers’ expectations by captivating them through each interaction and now had to be re-created in a virtual set-up since the world was enmeshed in the Covid-19 crisis. In the words of Walby (2022, p. 511): “the definition of crisis as an event in a short period and a longer period of consequences that cascades in non-linear form helps to make sense of developments related to Covid-19”. The afore-mentioned circumstances raised concerns about how working more collaboratively with peers, teams and customers might be possible in organisations at the edge of chaos (Balasubramanian and Fernandes, 2022; Critten, 2016; Stacey *et al.*, 2002). This paper, therefore, explores how leaders can achieve the change management needed to keep sales performance healthy during unprecedented crises. It sets forth a model framework for change, taking in the development of transferable skills in a work-based learning context.

A literature review is provided, one that focusses on leadership and learning in organisational life where Plato’s ideas and work-at-play are both amplified and presented in a model framework. In the Methods section, there is an explanation of the key activities for model framework application. Finally, the significance of the model framework for change is highlighted in the Results and Discussion sections, revealing that the team achieved positive results by adopting it. Addressing the current literature gap, this paper offers a real-world case study of a business-to-business (B2B) international sales organisation.

Literature review

Bowers *et al.* (2017) define a crisis as a high-risk, high-magnitude event with potential impacts so severe that it can threaten the credibility, perhaps even the survival, of the affected organisation; they emphasise the vital role anticipation has in organisational life. The authors address the need to select the right leader for effective crisis management, given that most organisations rely on their current leader to lead them out of crisis, often with less-than-ideal

results. They propose a framework combining organisational culture and leadership style that allows organisations to match a given crisis with the best possible crisis response leader. [Bowers *et al.*'s \(2017\)](#) concept of crisis implies internal or external originating factors. Yet it downplays the high level of uncertainty that a crisis such as Covid-19 implies: Covid-19 was a new and on-going situation with an unknown time frame, which made it difficult to anticipate and plan events ([He and Harris, 2020](#); [Ratten, 2020](#)). Specific attention should be paid to its impact on many B2B sales forces, as the pandemic's immediate, severe and rapid spread was wholly unanticipated ([Luu, 2021](#)).

According to [Walby \(2022, p. 505\)](#), the Covid-19 crisis fits the definition of “an event that has the potential to cause a large detrimental change to the social system and in which there is a lack of proportionality between cause and consequence, which contains three key elements: temporality, lack of proportionality and scale”. Physical and social distancing resulted in major cultural changes regarding how individuals interacted and behaved. Therefore, in contrast to previous crisis management models, which focus on risk assessment, business profitability or the leadership style of one leader during a crisis, this work explores the circumstances related to an unprecedented crisis, when a direct threat to people's health highlights the role of internal and external human agents in organisations. Conceptual studies such as [Cortez and Johnston \(2020\)](#) adopt Social Exchange Theory (SET) as a framework to answer how B2B companies successfully navigated the Covid-19 crisis. SET focusses on investigating human attitudes and behaviours during periods of crises to foster resilience. This means contextualising the effect of an unprecedented crisis in human attitude and behaviour and promoting coping and resilience ([Luu, 2021](#)). Most existing literature in this field has focussed on one or a few factors and models ([Errida and Lofti, 2021](#)). Specifically, [Balasubramanian and Fernandes \(2022\)](#) undertook a study on crisis leadership in organisations during the Covid-19 pandemic, concluding that this research field remains fragmented and limited with empirical research still emerging. To illuminate the leadership skills required during this type of crisis, they suggest a higher-order measurement model of crisis leadership comprising openness and communication, compassion and care, resilience and courage, decisiveness, consultation and collaboration and empowerment. Additionally, they suggest a follower-centred approach to crisis leadership “given that the followers positive perceptions of leadership style are associated with a more positive [. . .] crisis performance” ([2022, p. 24](#)). This model advocates adopting multiple-leadership styles simultaneously to meet the changing needs of a complex organisation.

The above-mentioned models do not fully cover the necessary elements to promote change, such as learning in organisations. They fail to consider the non-linear dependencies of the pandemic crisis ([Walby, 2022](#)) and instead concern themselves with traditional views of organisations, which limit the capacity to put the principles of organisational learning into practice ([Critten, 2016](#)). Complexity theory (CT) provides an alternative view of organisations: it views organisations as complex systems that operate according to specific rules; it claims that explicit learning patterns in the workplace can lead to disturbances which will in turn promote transformation ([Critten, 2016](#); [Stacey *et al.*, 2002](#)). Furthermore, several studies suggest that developing transferable skills is vital to managing change ([Succi and Canovi, 2020](#); [Miller and Konstantinou, 2022](#)).

Therefore, in the context of nurturing the capacity to unleash the most effective sales leadership strategies and to explore new ways to manage unexpected change and chaos, this paper argues that a framework for change must be based on transferable skills coupled with explicit patterns and simple rules that help when organisations are on “the edge of chaos” ([Stacey *et al.*, 2002](#), pp. 107–108). “The edge of chaos” translates to the advent of an unprecedented crisis within a digital world of volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity or volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (VUCA)-world ([Bennett and Lemoine, 2014](#)). The author proposes to add to the extant literature by demonstrating a

leadership model framework for collaborative change in a work-based project context based on two key pillars: leadership based on Plato's ideas and the concept of play-at-work.

For this author, play-at-work complemented ideas from Plato's *Republic*, which in turn provided guidance for developing a framework for change in a digital world.

Plato

[Bridges \(2009\)](#) is convinced that managing a transition process is essential for managing change. He proposes managing transitions by demonstrating "how endings ensure the continuity of what really matters" and considering how "people have to let go of a piece of their identity to protect the integrity of the whole" (2009, p. 41). Significantly, empowering a team helps to assuage the anxiety that may be experienced during the change process ([Kouzes and Posner, 2017](#)). [Pashiardis](#) proposes philosophy as a vehicle to achieve transitions by holistically empowering and unleashing people's potential: "through philosophy, we are able to examine the inner self, to reflect and to learn and to unleash the potentiality of the human brain and soul" (2009, p. 2). Aligned to this wider perspective of searching for the certainty of what matters, Plato's leadership view, described in *The Republic* ([Plato, 2020](#)), distinguishes between the purpose of philosophical inquiry, which is certainty or knowledge regarding what is ultimately true and unchanging, and beliefs created and revised by human beings in their daily lives, which are inevitably tinged with speculation and error ([Pashiardis, 2009](#)).

Plato argues that leadership consists of a search for justice, undergirded by bravery and wisdom. Plato's philosopher-leader is a virtuous leader who remains "just" in spite of the pressures and inducements derived from being unjust ([Bauman, 2018](#); [Pashiardis, 2009](#)). Acting in a way that is just bringing such leaders into situations in which they must confront public opinion ([Tsakmakis, 2006](#)). The conflicts that arise in these situations oblige leaders to assume the position of leaders or followers. For Plato, the worst leaders are those who lack knowledge and use persuasive speech for unjust ends ([Bauman, 2018](#)). Thus, Plato's view of leadership provides mechanisms for implementing a successful change in an organisation by helping to manage transition, narrowing the leader-follower perception gap and achieving congruence between leaders and followers to engage employees, especially during times of crisis ([Caringal-Go et al., 2021](#); [Balasubramanian and Fernandes, 2022](#)).

Play

In the context of liberating people's untapped leadership skills, this paper also considers exploring various ways of engaging employees. Before the Covid-19 crisis, organisations searched for ways to engage employees. Play-at-work is a concept related to promoting job satisfaction and productivity: the theory is that it should unleash creativity and curiosity at the individual and team levels. According to [Sonta \(2022\)](#), play-at-work comprises different aspects. One being serious play, with an identified purpose and the intention to achieve "serious, work-related objectives"; the other being "just playing", which relates to "fun" and "joy" in the sense of play as enjoyment and relaxation ([Petelczyc et al., 2018](#); [Van Vleet and Feeney, 2015](#)), which creates unexpected scenarios full of joy ([Sonta, 2022](#)). Research on self-determination theory (SDT) examines participation in play-at-work activities and strongly suggests that games which satisfy core needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness are those that people will be intrinsically motivated to play ([Celestine and Yeo, 2021](#)). Similarly, research found that a major motivation for people to play games, especially virtual games, is the experience of immersion, similar to escaping reality by being immersed in an epic tale or exploring and role-playing in a fantasy environment ([Williams et al., 2008](#)). According to [Calleja \(2011\)](#), immersion is the player's sensation of inhabiting the virtual environment represented onscreen; he defines immersion as the sensation of being in a game.

The model framework

If we reflect on Plato's idea of the individual as one who is immersed in a river of constant change (Stern, 1991; Plato, 2020), we can conceptualise immersion and this "river of change" as an invitation to immerse oneself in a context of VUCA. We can also provide a means of understanding the role of leadership in navigating this river of change by (1) embracing justice and searching for wisdom (virtue) and (2) overcoming the barrier of public opinion or the follower effect (vice) and thereby enabling leaders to achieve the change management needed to keep sales performance healthy during an unprecedented crisis or, in other words, when immersed in a VUCA world.

Therefore, blending these concepts, this paper formulates an original model framework. Viewed diagrammatically, it becomes the 3V's for unleashing leadership potential and impact performance: VUCA immersion, virtue seeking and vice avoidance.

- (1) Immersion in the river of VUCA
- (2) Embracing justice and searching for wisdom (virtue)
- (3) Encountering the barrier of public opinion or the follower effect (vice)

Ultimately, the pandemic crisis necessitated new ways of addressing change. In the context of this research, attempting to captivate customers through sales interaction created immersions in a virtual set-up and assuaged people's anxiety. Therefore, this model was applied by using action research to show leaders how to achieve the change management needed to keep sales performance healthy during an unprecedented crisis. This process is described in the Methods section.

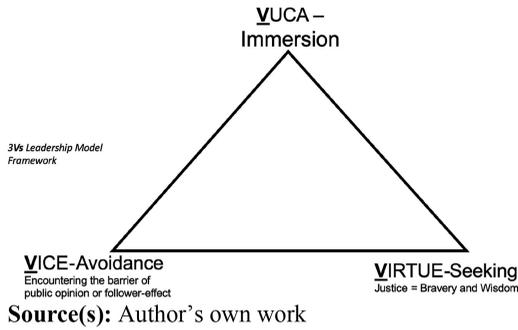
Methods

In line with concerns about strategic learning, this study presents data from a work-based project which adopted an action research (AR) approach grounded in real-life work needs (Garnett *et al.*, 2016). Using a single B2B international sales organisation during Covid-19 as a site for effective problem-based learning in a workplace setting (Miller and Konstantinou, 2022), the inquiry became a way to enhance "the chance to collaborate and share ideas about changes, alterations, and new ways of operating" (Helyer, 2015, p. 16). Indeed, action research can solve real-life concerns and work-based learning projects have "the potential to provide the kinds of challenges that provoke and enhance the attainment of formal operational capabilities" (Cooper *et al.*, 2010, p. 64). Similarly, knowledge in itself is not a source of advantage for organisations, but knowledge applied to decisive action and emotional conviction certainly can be (Birkinshaw, 2014).

In AR the researcher seeks to use a theory in real situations, gain feedback from this experience, modify it and try it again. Each iteration of the AR process adds to the theory, in this paper, to a framework, so it is more likely to be appropriate for a variety of situations (McNiff, 2010; Avison *et al.*, 1999). The project involved testing and enhancing this model framework for transformation, empowerment, collaboration, and ultimately, a team's leadership capabilities, taking in the development of transferable skills in a work-based learning context, where remote working was enacted. As in other companies, people went without face-to-face contact with colleagues for months (Kraus *et al.*, 2020).

Setting forth the model (see Figure 1) necessitated defining research actions (McNiff, 2010) following the three simple rules (3V's) embedded in the practice of sales management, combining reflective practice, interacting with teams and discussions with leaders whilst collecting data and emphasising the pillars of the framework and its utilisation to generate new insights and actions (Wall, 2016). Working in this way, the AR approach necessitated researchers and practitioners to share a mutually acceptable ethical framework (Avison *et al.*, 1999).

Figure 1.
3V's leadership model
framework



Ethics

This study was subjected to ethical review by the Business School Ethical Committee, which provided clearance for the project research. It was carried out by observing the integrity, dignity and confidentiality principles that guide conducting business in an organisational setting whilst pursuing the main action research goal of creating generalisable knowledge. Participants were fully informed about the research and were invited to provide voluntary feedback. Data, examples and specific details of real-life cases have been anonymised to protect identity for data collection.

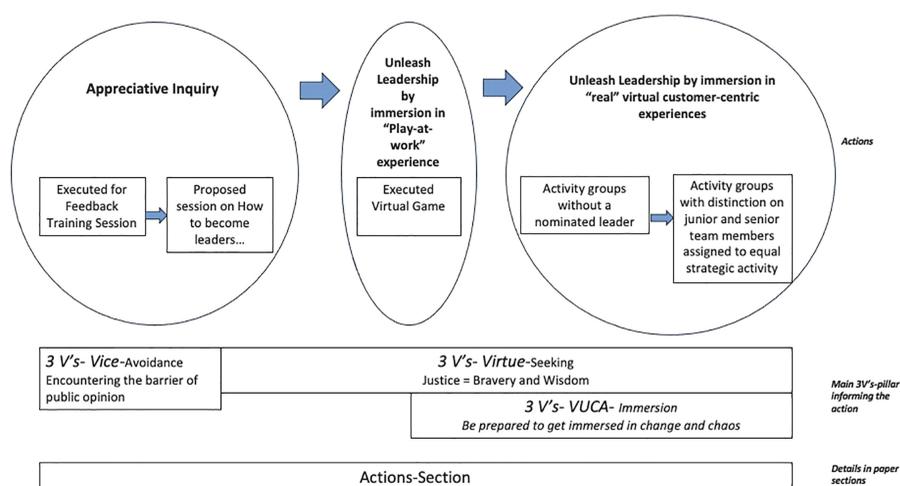
Data collection

Data were collected through qualitative methodology. Data were derived from informal observations of the participants, 20 semi-structured interviews, 30 water-cooler sessions and focus group discussions involving participants. Three group focus sessions complemented the discussions, interview and observations. The external (5) and internal (15) participants were IT and technical experts, sales and presale leaders and professionals in the sales and presales fields. A qualitative analysis was applied to collect data related to observations, reflections and responses, and notes were taken. This analysis was based on deductive coding organised according to the key pillars of work-at-play and leadership coupled with Plato's ideas reflected in the model framework of the 3 V's. The goal was to analyse the identified organisational issues in a meaningful way.

These data led to new insights and actions, which provided new data from reading, observing and reflecting on different theories, business reports, training sessions and feedback were collected from different sources and again qualitatively analysed. This approach helped to explore the complexity of the data collected for analysis and avoided supporting pre-existent beliefs. It had the additional advantage of minimising bias and improving validity (Shah, 2019). The data were collected in an international business setup, ensuring that this research has practical implications for managers.

Data collection took place through several actions. A preliminary focus group session followed by water-cooler sessions with internal participants identified the initial priority area. This approach encouraged participant engagement and explored concerns as a basis for research actions. The project then drew on AR in the form of Appreciative Inquiry: a specific training session was set up for learning how to give and receive constructive feedback. The training session led to a virtual game. The results of the game demonstrated that a solid framework to follow could develop a team's leadership capabilities in sales performance. Further model evaluation in the form of participant activities, water-cooler sessions and external and internal discussions gave insights into the effectiveness of the model application. This is described below in the Action section. Figure 2 shows the flow of the AR.

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Source(s): Author's own work

Figure 2.
Main 3V's-pillar
informing the action
details in paper
sections

This research project was undertaken with Middlesex University's and Consalia Sales Business School tutors' guidance and feedback throughout.

Actions

Appreciative Inquiry. Data collected from a preliminary focus group session followed by water-cooler sessions with internal participants identified the initial priority area: 3V's-Vice pillar. Data collected showed significant discomfort amongst the teams in challenging the sales cycle activities and priorities (Eastman *et al.*, 2020). It also showed that team and individual performance in the sales organisation was exposed to many opinions, which created discomfort in expressing ideas. To reach an agreement on what was good and just in the context of sales activities, an agreement which normally was dependent on the knowledge and expertise of all team members was even more difficult in this new remote world. Consequently, instead of confronting peers' opinions, team members often acted as followers. To address this concern and confront the barrier of the public opinion through model adoption, it had to be understood that the root cause might lie, first, in psychological safety, people needed to believe that they would not be punished for expressing unconventional ideas or making mistakes (Edmondson, 2018); they also needed to learn how to receive and give feedback without fear of censure (Grant, 2013). Thus, the first action was an Appreciative Inquiry session to provide a two-hour specific training to examine the relevance of constructive feedback as an effective vehicle for psychological safety, explore opinions on what constitutes constructive feedback and determine the conditions necessary for achieving it (Hattie and Timperley, 2007). The project incorporated active team feedback rounds for the following focus group discussions. Data collection showed people's raising concern about how working more collaboratively with peers, teams and customers might be possible in organisations at the edge of chaos. Specifically, establishing rapport and personal connection was difficult in a remote setting. People struggled to access crucial internal information, as meetings with key stakeholders were put on hold, sometimes indefinitely and informal exchanges became rare in the new virtual environment. Here, leaders "grappled with many new questions for which they did not have answers, even as their teams looked for direction" (Balasubramanian and Fernandes, 2022, p. 2). Similarly, career preoccupations during this

operating system realignment (Kotter, 2014; Bowers *et al.*, 2017) undermined the capacity for effective leadership.

To address this additional concern, the researcher prepared a second Appreciative Inquiry session entitled “How to become leaders in our lives”, aimed at inspiring positive images of the future of organisations, fostering collaboration and agreeing on what was just in the new context of sales activities. This approach sought to bring out the best in a person, situation, or organisation (Cooperrider *et al.*, 2008). Confined at home for months, teams appeared reluctant to engage in “just another formal virtual session” effectively. What, then, did they want to do? They offered the idea of playing a virtual game instead. This response, which was rather unexpected, led the researcher to adapt her former plan: now she would instead observe participants having fun and boosting their leadership capabilities by playing a virtual game.

Unleashing leadership by immersion in “play-at-work” experience. The virtual game mainly consisted of participants working together in mock seller-customer interactions and observing each other. To complicate the seller-customer exchange, the participants had to imagine being locked away in a room where everyone had to work together to find the secret lock to escape. Each team, composed of a collective seller and a collective customer, had to produce an optimal result (a sale) to access the secret lock to escape. In addition, the sale had to be conducted in a spirit of enjoyment. This was a play-at-work activity of “fun” and “joy” in the sense of play as enjoyment and relaxation, as this game had no goals other than having fun. What was unexpectedly observed was a situation in which team members exhibited leadership behaviours which were often missing in an actual sales context. They were confident, not fearful of making mistakes or being subjected to criticism. They listened to each other’s opinions and made decisions as required to leverage their ability to accomplish the mission.

This virtual game led to key insights into how fun activities can be applied to leadership models, as included in the discussion section. To dive deeper into those insights, the researcher decided to focus on learning how to develop those leadership abilities in the *real context* of sales to achieve the change management needed to keep sales performance healthy.

Unleashing leadership by immersion in “real” virtual customer-centric experiences whilst seeking just approaches. The project focussed then on impacting the sales organisation’s vision of consistently exceeding customers’ expectations that now had to be re-created by “immersing” customers in virtual experiences. First, drawing on the 3V’s framework’s concept of immersion in the river of VUCA helped the researcher gain confidence in promoting a new action that meant transferring skills in which teams and their leaders had prior experience, such as captivating customers in product demonstrations. Therefore, three activity groups for the corresponding three sales engagements for strategic customers were assembled to create immersion in virtual customer-centric experiences. These activity groups of up to five members needed to operate without a “nominated activity leader”. As participants did this for the first time in a complete virtual setup, this transfer meant immersing them in new sales situations and developing new leadership traits, such as self-management (Goleman and Boyatzis, 2017). Second, as all companies were operating in the world of virtual sales, teams needed to develop new strategies to stand out in the virtual setup. Exploring new ways of doing this, a distinction between “junior” and “senior” team members was made to define groups for completing sales support activities. In contrast to the allocation based on expertise-level-hierarchies, assigning mixed levels of experts or senior prioritisation for strategic sales engagements, instead one group was assembled and formed by junior members and another by experienced members who received the same type of sales engagements: the desired outcome was the same for both – the leveraging knowledge and a leadership style that encouraged collaborative change. On the one hand, the intention was to draw on the model framework for prioritising and embracing uncertainty, promoting immersion and bravery in the search for answers and new competitive strategies (wisdom), as well as eliminating distinctions based on hierarchies, which was an example of a “just

approach” for this project (Plato, 2020). On the other hand, from the leadership skills development perspective, few instructions were provided, thus allowing the teams to self-manage. For example, team members sought solutions as a group if there was a matter of ambiguity from a customer. Leaders were simply each other’s teammates even when conflicts concerning supplier-centric behaviours and tight deadlines arose. Groups worked together to explore options to overcome obstacles.

Results

During the virtual game activity, in the search for a key to unlock their respective doors, participants, acting as both sellers and buyers, had fun as they worked together, unleashing their leadership potential. During the real customer engagements, the observation was similar, fostering sales results. More often, peers’ feedback was expressed around higher competence levels, such as, “Wow, the team was brave changing the conversation and overcoming the initial customer’s reticence today,” which aligned with the progress observed in the leadership challenge of becoming virtuous leaders, as all the teams and group members showed bravery (audacity) and wisdom (tactfulness, honesty and humility). The self-managed approach showed that the leader was “swimming alongside” the activity groups, creating a synchronised movement between them, which helped to eliminate certain misconceptions, such as the idea that the customer’s heart could not be reached in a virtual setup. Teams showed an enhanced ability to perceive customers’ signals as they reported that their customers were more receptive to their selling techniques: “Great when you managed to capture the customer’s attention proposing to write thoughts on the chat” was a typical response from team member to team member. In most of the customer interactions it was asked: “What aspects of the session were more meaningful for you?” at the end, and notes were taken. Comments were shared such as “We prolonged the meeting, but it helps us to explain our current real pain-points in an open-way and listen to your guidance to tackle them” were shared. Customers appeared to be leaving behind their own misperceptions about the value of products and solutions for their companies’ business: the relationship between seller and customer felt stronger. Furthermore, it was reported that a feeling of mission completion and joy was similar to the one observed during the virtual game. Leaders clearly need to focus on people’s happiness at work: “Joy connects people more powerfully than almost any other human experience” (Liu, 2019, p. 2). Fun, combined with a search for just approaches, appeared to boost results in a crisis such as Covid-19. Focussing on having fun helped overcome concerns about how working more collaboratively with peers, teams and customers might be possible in organisations at the edge of chaos and helped to develop transferable skills in a work-based learning context.

Data examination from group activities described groups engaging in dialogue, showing curiosity by asking questions, acknowledging more fallibility and helping teams feel more comfortable proposing sales strategies that challenged the sales cycle and agreeing on what sales activities to follow. Rehearsing planned customer interactions in groups was facilitated to set this feedback up as a lasting routine. The following quarter’s sales results improved, achieving double-digit yearly growth in strategic solutions and higher activity effort, which displayed an increase in annual growth; meanwhile, the organisation’s employee survey highlighted higher engagement and leadership trust. This demonstrates the relevance of establishing a safe set-up for learning which includes effective feedback.

Discussion

The ability to perceive a team’s signals was essential for recognising and profiting from ambiguous situations and leading others through times of uncertainty. Understanding a

group's situation helped to overcome ambiguity blindness (Wilkinson, 2013) and aided in navigating new paths despite new critical circumstances. An example was to change the initial research plan from an appreciative inquiry session to a virtual game. Thus, this project became one that explored theoretical and empirical research on play-at-work (Petelczyc *et al.*, 2018) as it discovered that fun was a valid alternative to formal plans and models.

Play-at-work as an accelerator in leadership development

Beyond the aspects mentioned above and others, such as social bonding, team cohesion, or stress reduction (Wall *et al.*, 2017; Petelczyc *et al.*, 2018), this paper advocates the benefits of play-at-work as an accelerator in leadership development through enabling interpersonal interactions and embracing diversity (Kark, 2011). In a virtual setup, non-verbal cues are limited, making understanding the other person's emotions and thoughts harder. Fun helps all of us to better communicate and to "liberate the leader" within a team. In the paradox of power, the leader is just another teammate – giving power away makes the leader more powerful (Kouzes and Posner, 2017, p. 308). This project reflected Huizinga's definition of play (1995, p. 13) in a business environment: "Play is a free activity standing quite consciously outside ordinary life as being not serious but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly". In this case, it is important to highlight the concept of "free activity", as there was no deliberate structure in the virtual game. The team was encouraged to collaborate unrestrictedly. Using simple instructions, teams acted as self-determined, self-regulated and autonomous leaders who completed the game successfully. This experience demonstrated the natural human propensity towards self-organisation (Elloy, 2008), which satisfies SDT's three innate psychological needs: competence, autonomy and relatedness (Deci and Ryan, 2000). It was clearly observed that leaders needed to explore alternative paths to develop a team's leadership skills, especially in unprecedented times of crisis. Play-at-work, for example, was a way of generating fun whilst motivating people to examine opportunities to address organisational challenges.

Plato's search for truth reveals reflections on several leadership skills

When eliminating the level of expertise distinction-based hierarchy, several insights were gained. Attaining more mature sales opportunities based on customer-centric and creative outcomes was equal across all groups. Junior teams were slightly more committed to sharing findings and willing to ask for support. By jumping over hierarchical barriers and focussing on making a positive difference (Smith and Aaker, 2013), more junior members appeared to have a higher level of engagement. This experience demonstrated that a leader's "just approach" of giving team members leadership opportunities independently of their seniority level had achieved the desired results.

Furthermore, first, to agree on what was good and just in the context of sales activities, counting on the knowledge and expertise of all team members was possible due to the pursuit of wisdom of leaders and teams. In other words, becoming virtuous leaders by exercising bravery and wisdom was required to progress in the leadership challenge. This meant that teams needed to develop assertiveness to focus on the right sales values of audacity with tactfulness, honesty and humility (Squire, 2020) in activities such as challenging the sales cycle and receiving and giving feedback. This paper aligns with Bauman's idea (2016) that a philosopher-leader is a virtuous corporate leader who pursues the reality of what is good and true – justice – over seeking honour. By applying the concept of searching for wisdom and embracing justice (virtue), leaders change organisations by reflecting on their own qualities: there becomes an expectation for all to fulfil and self-manage their roles, promoting autonomy and competence and unleashing leadership potential. Therefore, considerations of SDT could illuminate the effect of promoting autonomy and competence as another potential link

between the model framework based on Plato's ideas and this project's outcomes. See [Figure 3](#).

Second, when members began to challenge the sales cycle and carry out the rehearsal sessions, their relationship with peers, customers and leaders revealed that they were learning to both follow and lead whilst fulfilling the need for relatedness as defined by SDT. This 3V's application revealed that SDT's psychological needs appeared to align with the concepts informed by Plato's views. See [Figure 4](#).

Third, as for convincing versus manipulating, this research showed that the more customer-centricity sales values were in place, the less manipulation and more improvisation occurred ([Charoensukmongkol and Pandey, 2022](#)).

Leadership framework for change amid a crisis

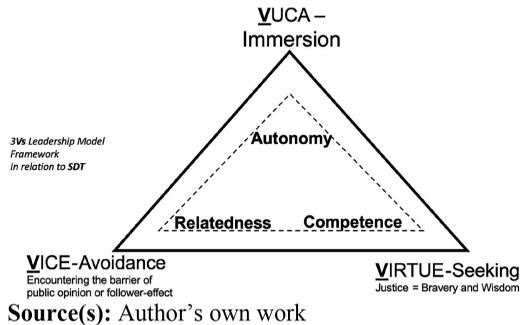


Figure 3.
3V's Leadership model Framework in relation to SDT

3Vs	Goal	Action	Activities	SDT-Related Psychological Need
<u>V</u>ICUA	Immersion in Change and Chaos	Be prepared to get immersed in change and chaos, leaving behind your own beliefs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Embrace simple rules (virtue and vice) that allow the leader to believe in the process Swim the team along as the leader empowers team members to lead 	Autonomy
<u>V</u>irtue	Pursuit of justice	Embrace justice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Act with bravery Search for wisdom (knowledge, tactfulness, honesty, and humility) Establish a continuous learning setup 	Competence
<u>V</u>ice	Be aware of the follower effect	Beware of reaching psychological safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Make sure the leader leads and does not act as a follower Establish a "psychologically safe setup" for learning, including feedback and coaching 	Relatedness

Source(s): Author's own work

Figure 4.
How to apply 3V's in a broader public

Incorporating Plato's reflections on leading change provides a sense of security in the face of uncertainty and chaos as his ideas have stood the test of time unlike many more contemporary ideas. Moreover, Platonian ideas inspire a way of acting (Pashiardis, 2009), as Plato's great leaders ought to be great philosophers (philosopher-leaders) because philosophy constrains our passion so we can act with the serenity of true intellectuals. These thoughts resonate in Birkinshaw's comments (2022) on Kahneman's reflections (2011, 2021) after the pandemic about overcoming human reaction in times of crisis: "when faced with potential disruption [. . .] the smart thing to do is to think slow, take careful and deliberate action paced over time".

Conclusions and significance

In summary, the research actions informed by the 3V's model offer a "planned approach to change" which promotes "an order and a linear sequence to processes that are in reality messy and untidy" (Buchanan and Storey, 1997, p. 127). Therefore, this research changed the perception that no organisational development occurs without a detailed plan. Instead, survival depended on developing simple rules summarised in the proposed 3V's leadership model framework that could keep an organisation operating and even thriving on the edge of chaos.

Implementing change and impacting sales performance in times of crisis requires leading collaborative change. The 3V's model framework might help leaders manage change and remind them that when they transform organisations, they do so in their own profound reflection. This reinforces the moral obligation of leaders to touch the soul of a leader, which helps unleash leadership potential and abandon entrenched beliefs that might prevent change. In a digital world, developing each team member as a leader based on values was not optional but mandatory and became a differentiator for achieving high sales performance in times of crisis. Therefore, applying the 3V's model might help transform a team into virtuous philosopher-leaders, a possible competitive advantage, assisting organisations in surviving in a digital world where other leaders may create dazzling videos but perhaps lack the virtues of wisdom and courage when connecting with customers. The play-at-work applications of this paper might be equally as important to relationships with clients within the context of leadership. Besides, this paper contributes by linking SDT with Plato's legacy in the 3V's model, illuminating the effect of promoting autonomy, competence and relatedness. This is combined with other applied leadership theories, such as self-management (Goleman and Boyatzis, 2017) and their application in a sales context, to which this paper brings an additional contribution.

Amid a crisis, organisations can better promote collaboratively led change and impact sales performance by developing leadership capabilities in teams. This paper provides a conceptual framework and shows how coupling philosophy with leadership in work-based settings contributes to a sales organisation's practice of achieving accountability, agility and collaborative change. In addition, it prepares organisations to respond to any crisis management efforts by providing the ability for profound reflection on fundamental human aspects and straightforward, transferable skills. The research is on real data in an international B2B sales organisation. Sales leaders might benefit from applying the 3V's framework promoting the continuous learning of three transferable skills and following a philosopher-leader prototype in the future, as they need to be fast learners who embrace continuous change, feel comfortable with it whilst being proficient and be ready to collaborate as well as act as influencers across the organisation (Artho *et al.*, 2021).

Crisis is a general international phenomenon that is also present in any organisation. Using wider approaches to work-based learning develops the courage to challenge the status quo by applying concepts such as philosophy, SDT and play-at-work to sales. New insights can be generated, and the organisation's practice can be improved by exploring a journey towards leadership development. In doing so, this 3V's model highlights universal virtues,

leadership patterns and psychological traits that can be applied to improve and enhance leadership skills in the broader public, such as public policy or education. The prospect of extending the application of the 3V's model beyond its current pilot phase becomes an intriguing avenue to explore. Key recommendations for leaders exploring ways of embracing the 3V's model include embracing simple rules (VUCA-Immersion, virtue and vice) that allow the leader to immerse in the process, swim the team along, rather than in a top-down direction, search for wisdom, make sure the leader leads and does not act as a follower and establish a psychologically safe setup for learning.

Future research could deepen the results by using the 3V's model for extending the application, impacting culture and creating environmental conditions that support leadership development, thus enhancing the model by examining broader perspectives, such as literature in work settings (Eastman, 2016).

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