



SERVANT FIRST OR SURVIVAL FIRST? HOW SERVANT-LEADERS LEAD DURING COVID-19 —JIYING SONG

The year 2020 has been most challenging for many people all over the world. The COVID-19 pandemic has left almost no one's life untouched. George Floyd's death and other race-related incidents also unsettled the world to its core. Ancient lamentation resonates with us today: "How lonely sits the city that once was full of people" (Lamentations 1:1a, NRSV).

The statistics help tell the story of this year. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2020) and Johns Hopkins University & Medicine (2020) has confirmed more than 33 million COVID-19 cases worldwide and more than one million deaths in 216 countries. The United States has more than seven million confirmed cases and more than 200,000 deaths as of September 30, 2020 (Johns Hopkins University & Medicine, 2020; WHO, 2020). Unemployment rate in the U.S. was 3.7% in August 2019 and skyrocketed to 14.7% in April 2020. By August 2020, the rate was down to 8.4%, but the future is uncertain (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020).

Among all the struggles and grief, leadership is more important than ever. How do servant-leaders react to this cruel reality? What does holistic leadership look like during a crisis? Should organizations serve first or fight for survival first? Should they prioritize people or profit? Are economic responsibilities really the



foundation of a corporate's social responsibility? How are we going to serve the sick, the broken, the vulnerable, and the forgotten? How are we going to lead with courage, faith, and grace? Do people with different genders lead differently?

Servant-leadership, in its ethic of love, care, and service to the least privileged, is a potential antidote to patriarchal binds because it can serve as “a driving force for generating discourse on gender-integrative approaches to organizational leadership” (Reynolds, 2014, p. 51). During a crisis, leaders need foresight and awareness (traditionally masculine aspect of leadership) as well as listening, empathy, and caring for people (more feminine-attributed aspects of leadership) (Reynolds, 2014). How can we discern and develop the feminine and masculine within every leader? Servant-leadership, “as a feminism-informed, care-oriented, and gender-integrative approach to organizational leadership” (p. 35), can offer a holistic and responsible way of leading during crises. Honoring both feminine and masculine giftedness can deepen the holistic foundation of servant-leadership. Unfortunately, gender studies of servant-leadership are limited (Bartuto & Gifford, 2010; Crippen, 2004; Eicher-Catt, 2005; Lehrke & Sowden, 2017; Ngunjiri, 2010; Oner, 2009; Reynolds, 2013, 2014; Song, 2018).

This research project examines the lived experience of three female and three male servant-leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic through a hermeneutic phenomenological study to explore the essence of corporate social responsibility (CSR) and crisis leadership through the lens of servant-leadership. Prior to this study, to my knowledge, no hermeneutic phenomenological research of CSR and crisis leadership has been conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study documents how servant-leaders led during this unprecedented time; it collects leadership challenges and



experiences, helps leaders reflect upon their own leadership, explores successful leadership traits, and offers insights for business leaders across gender.

In this article, literature is reviewed in the areas of crisis leadership, corporate social responsibility, and servant-leadership. Following is a discussion of this project's methodology, methods, participants, findings, suggestions, limitations, and recommendations for further research. This article ends with conclusions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Crisis Leadership

People tend to consider crisis as negative, as something to be avoided at all cost. The Oxford English Dictionary (2020) defines *crisis* as “a vitally important or decisive stage in the progress of anything; a turning-point; also, a state of affairs in which a decisive change for better or worse is imminent.” This definition resonates with its Chinese translation “危机”—danger and opportunity.

A crisis can also be defined as “an event that affects or has the potential to affect the whole organization” (Mitroff, 2004, p. 6). This COVID-19 pandemic definitely put all kinds of organizations under crisis scrutiny. The challenges of this crisis are its power as an unprecedented turning-point and its large scale of uncertainties. Whether an organization is being able to act creatively to avoid/mitigate the danger or exploit/enhance the opportunity will set the stage for their success or failure in the long-run if not immediately. Some businesses clearly benefited from the crisis. The usage of eClinicalWorks Telehealth increased 1400% within three weeks at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic and exceeded 1.5 million daily minutes in April 2020 (eClinicalWorks, 2020). On June 2020, at its annual developer conference, Apple announced that it is



going to bring handwashing detection to the Apple Watch among other new features (Eadicicco, 2020). *Be creative.*

Crisis leadership differs from crisis management in that the latter focuses on a mechanistic or tactical aspect of a leader's role in crisis whereas the former is more systematic and proactive (Gigliotti & Fortunato, 2017). In terms of crisis management, Kerrissey and Edmondson (2020) listed what good leadership looks like during this pandemic: acting with urgency, communicating with transparency, taking responsibility and focusing on solving problems, and engaging in constant updating. These actions serve as a tactical aspect of leadership, thus are good crisis management strategies rather than crisis leadership. However, when the authors propose "tapping into suffering to build meaning," they highlighted a more systematic and proactive approach to lead during crises (para. 22): "We believe that leadership is strengthened by continually referring to the big picture as an anchor for meaning, resisting the temptation to compartmentalize or to consider human life in statistics alone" (para. 24). Scott Cowan (2014), president of Tulane University during Hurricane Katrina, offered 10 principles for crisis leadership: Do the right thing, seek common ground, marshal facts, understand reality, aim high, stand up for your beliefs, make contact, innovate, embrace emotion, and be true to core values. Among these 10 principles, "seek common ground" and "be true to core values" serve to direct people to the bigger picture. *Build meaning.*

Leaders tend to protect their own or their organizations' reputation during a crisis. Gigliotti and Fortunato (2017) argued, "Crisis leadership involves more than simply saying the right things to the right audiences to uphold the reputation of an institution in the face of crisis" (p. 311). Rather, crisis leadership calls for "a more expansive understanding of the types of risks that a unit, department,



or institution faces—and a continual emphasis on personal and institutional learning at all phases of the crisis process” (p. 311). In short, crisis leadership calls for a learning attitude rather than solely preserving reputation. Given the amount of uncertainties during a crisis, leaders must be open to learn, be transparent, and be able to say, “I don’t know.” This approach takes humility, a contrast to traditional leadership in which people expect leaders to have all the answers in their pockets. Humility and honesty build trust in the leader-follower relationship. Leaders, as well as the organization, have to be open and learn together. *Be open.*

Crisis preparation remains a top priority for leaders (Gigliotti & Fortunato, 2017). “If things far away don’t concern you, you’ll soon mourn things close at hand” (Confucius, 2014, p. 121). Jacobs and Chase (2021) claim that operations and supply chain strategic planning requires risk management. The International Risk Governance Council (2019) was established in 2003 to provide policy makers, regulators, and key decision-makers with evidence-based recommendations about risk governance. However, most of risk management and crisis preparation did not consider a global pandemic. Gigliotti and Fortunato (2017) compiled a list of crisis taxonomies (p. 305), including human errors and natural disasters, but their list did not include a global pandemic. COVID-19 is not the first pandemic in recent human history. Past pandemics include the 1918 pandemic (H1N1 virus), the 1957-1958 pandemic (H2N2 virus), the 1968 pandemic (H3N2 virus), and the 2009 pandemic (H1N1pdm09 virus) (CDC, 2018). When organizations were hit by the COVID-19 pandemic, it was not that they did not prepare—they did not prepare to this extent. Facing a toilet paper shortage in May 2020, P&G’s chief product supply officer Julio Nemeth said, “We are prepared for thousands of different events, from cybersecurity attacks to earthquakes to fire. . . . But we were not prepared for all of



those happening at the same time, which is what the pandemic brought to us” (as cited in Wieczner, 2020). *Be prepared.*

Resilience is a term used often during a crisis. The European Commission (2016) has defined resilience as “the ability of an individual, a community or a country to cope, adapt and quickly recover from stress and shocks caused by a disaster, violence or conflict” (p. 1). This pandemic is challenging our community resilience, which focuses on the “reflective dimension of communities to deal with external shocks in their social structure and bounce back, strengthening their internal cohesion, their resources and sustainability to future shocks” (Estêvão et al., 2017, p. 11). However, community resilience is not about returning to the previous conditions or bouncing back after a disaster, but about taking collective actions to reduce the negative impacts and strengthen the community for the future (Cuervo et al., 2017). After record-breaking production, P&G’s team was considering business process reengineering to redesign their supply chain for a more volatile environment (Wieczner, 2020), which calls for being adaptable or agile. Agile or hybrid (a mix of agile and traditional) approaches to project management had more than 20% higher success rates than traditional ones in terms of stakeholder satisfaction (Reich, 2019). According to Project Management Institute and Agile Alliance (2017), the leadership theory underpinning agile approaches is servant-leadership:

Agile approaches emphasize servant leadership as a way to empower teams. Servant leadership is the practice of leading through service to the team, by focusing on understanding and addressing the needs and development of team members in order to enable the highest possible team performance. . . . Servant leadership is not unique to agile. But once having



practiced it, servant leaders can usually see how well servant leadership integrates into the agile mindset and value. (pp. 33-34)

Agile approaches offer a framework for delivering maximum value (meeting the expectations of high quality and speed from stakeholders) in a complex, uncertain environment. *Be agile.*

In summary, these five principles of crisis leadership emerge: be creative, build meaning, be open, be prepared, and be agile.

Corporate Social Responsibility

Long before the term Corporate Social Responsibility was coined, leaders and businesses had been searching for ways to make a positive contribution to society (Blowfield & Murray, 2008). With the rising of the concept of CSR, some people argued that profit maximization should remain the dominant purpose of business (Levitt, 1958) and that social issues are not the concerns of businesspeople (Friedman, 1962). In 1991, Freeman and Liedtka called to abandon the concept of CSR because it had become “a barrier to meaningful conversations about corporations and the good life” (p. 92). In spite of these oppositional voices, CSR still prevails. The focus of CSR has shifted from the role of business leaders to the behavior of companies, to environmental concerns, and to corporate citizenship (Blowfield & Murray, 2008). Thus, Blowfield and Murray (2008) assert that “no single definition is sufficient to capture the range of issues, policies, processes, and initiatives” of CSR (p. 16). The European Commission (2011) redefined CSR as “the responsibility of enterprises for their impacts on society and outlines what an enterprise should do to meet that responsibility” (para. 3). The European Commission states its strategy on CSR:

help enterprises achieve their full potential in terms of creating



wealth, jobs and innovative solutions to the many challenges facing Europe's society. It sets out how enterprises can benefit from CSR as well as contributing to society as a whole by taking greater steps to meet their social responsibility. (para. 1)

A four-part definition of CSR was developed by Carroll in 1979 and widely used since then. Carroll (1991) suggests that four kinds of social responsibilities constitute total CSR: economic (be profitable), legal (obey the law), ethical (be ethical), and philanthropic (be a good corporate citizen). In 1991, Carroll shaped the four-part definition into the form of a CSR pyramid. He described it as follows:

It portrays the four components of CSR, beginning with the basic building block notion that economic performance undergirds all else. At the same time, business is expected to obey the law because the law is society's codification of acceptable and unacceptable behavior. Next is business's responsibility to be ethical. At its most fundamental level, this is the obligation to do what is right, just, and fair, and to avoid or minimize harm to stakeholders (employees, consumers, the environment, and others). Finally, business is expected to be a good corporate citizen. This is captured in the philanthropic responsibility, wherein business is expected to contribute financial and human resources to the community and to improve the quality of life. (para. 19)

In 2016, Carroll took another look at the four-part definitional framework upon which the pyramid was created. He admitted that some issues had been raised about the applicability of his CSR pyramid in different global, situational, and organizational contexts (Carroll, 2016). Feminist scholar Spence (2016) examined Carroll's



CSR pyramid through the ethic of care and feminist perspectives; she indicates that Carroll's categories represented a masculinist perspective.

Carroll's (1991) hierarchical design of CSR set economic responsibilities or being profitable as the foundation of CSR, supporting the idea of Levitt (1958): profit maximization should be the dominant purpose of business. Carroll's (2016) CSR pyramid suggests that business should fulfill its social responsibilities in a sequential fashion, starting with being profitable, then obeying the law, then being ethical, and then being a good corporate citizen (even though he emphasized that the pyramid was supposed to be seen as an integrated, unified whole rather than different parts). This sequential fashion could be misleading or used as excuses in terms of meeting a corporate's social responsibilities. Where is the end of being profitable and the beginning of social responsibility? This question does not mean that a socially responsible business cannot or should not make profits. A social business model is to benefit economically disadvantaged or marginalized people/communities while being financially sustainable, not through donations or charity, but through its own economical sustainability (Osberg & Martin, 2015; Thompson & Doherty, 2006; Yunus et al., 2010). Yunus et al. (2010) placed a profit-maximizing business and a social business at two ends of the spectrum of profit maximization and social impact.

Starbucks is an example of a company that integrated CSR with sustainability. Starbucks (2005) defines a responsible company as "one that listens to its stakeholders and responds with honesty to their concerns" (p. 1). Apparently, Freeman's (1984) stakeholder theory influenced Starbucks in terms of being socially responsible as thinking about stakeholders as customers, employees, suppliers, communities, and shareholders. In its 2019 Global Social Impact Report, Starbucks (2020) emphasized its CSR focus as "being people



positive, planet positive, and profit positive” (p. 4). Starbucks’ CSR focus has moved from stakeholders to 3Ps (people, planet, profit). Elkington (2018) coined the term *triple bottom line* of people, planet, and profit in 1994. It is “a sustainability framework that examines a company’s social, environment, and economic impact” (para. 4). However, Elkington recalled this term in 2018 and claimed that it needed some fine tuning. He believed that the triple bottom line had been wrongly used because many corporations had been measuring its sustainability goals only in terms of profit. In order to keep the well-known 3Ps and its true meaning of sustainability, Kraaijenbrink (2019) suggested using “prosperity” to replace “profit.” Kraaijenbrink hoped to broaden the scope of economic impacts within the 3Ps while drawing attention away from profit as the only legitimate goal.

Grameen Danone Food Ltd (GDFL) is another example of a business centered on CSR and sustainability. GDFL is a joint venture by Group Danone, the largest food company in France, and Grameen Bank, established by the Bangladeshi economist Muhamad Yunus. GDFL “aims to fight poverty and malnutrition in Bangladesh and to create positive social impact throughout its value cycle” (Danone, 2020, para. 1). After the initial investment is returned to the investors, any profit gained through the operations will be reinvested in the company itself (Yunus et al., 2010). GDFL impacts 300,000 children in Bangladesh and has created sustainable revenues for 500 farmers, 200 local women, and 117 van pullers who distribute the products (Danone, 2020). GDFL has made people, planet, and prosperity (of local communities) the inner core of its business and CSR (economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic responsibilities) its outer core. Using the layers of the earth as a metaphor (Figure 1), I propose that 3Ps and CSR should be the core of business (Figure 2).



Figure 1: *Layers of the Earth*

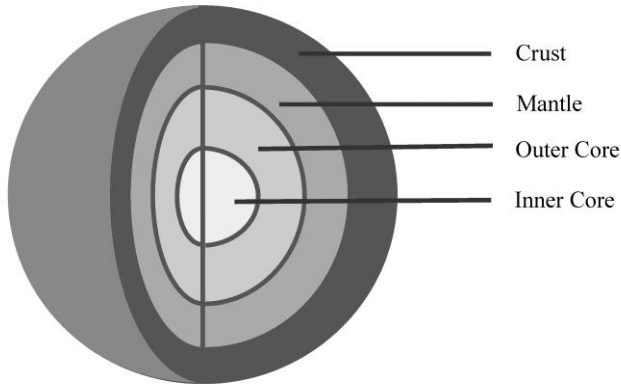
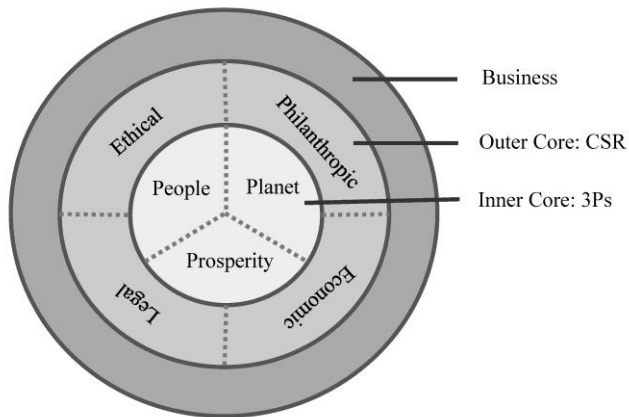


Figure 2: *3Ps and CSR as the Core of Business*



The dimensions of CSR are aligned with the goals of for-profit organizations as well as many nonprofit ones (Ferris, 1998; Waters & Ott, 2014). Kincaid (2017) pointed out that the lack of affirmations and the ineffective attempt to convey a meaningful message of CSR has hindered a genuine movement of building socially responsible organizations. However, this global pandemic has provided a great opportunity for businesses to move toward a



more authentic CSR (He & Harris, 2020). This study examined the practice of CSR in one for-profit and five nonprofit organizations during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Servant-Leadership

Servant-leadership is not a new concept even though 2020 is the 50th anniversary of Robert K. Greenleaf (2003) coining the term *servant-leader*. In ancient China, the best leader was regarded as one who served and nurtured others without contending with them and helped people accomplish things without taking credit: “The highest form of goodness is like water. Water knows how to benefit all things without striving with them” (Lao Tzu, 2005, p. 17). According to Judeo-Christian tradition, Jesus, as the son of God, emptied himself and took the form of a servant (Philippians 2:6-7). Preaching the kingdom of his father, Jesus led the way as a teacher, a sage, and a servant (Morse, 2008): “Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all” (Mark 10:43-44).

Greenleaf was a Quaker thinker and servant-leader. Retired from his career as Director of Management Research at AT&T, he founded the Center for Applied Ethics in 1964 and devoted his life to leadership studies. In 1970, he published “The Servant as Leader,” a landmark essay that used the phrase “servant-leader” (for original 1970 edition, see Greenleaf, 2003). Drawing from his experiential leadership practice and deep Quaker spirituality, he coined and defined the term *servant-leadership*: “The servant-leader *is* servant first. . . . It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve *first*. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. That person is sharply different from one who is *leader* first” (Greenleaf, 1977/2002, p. 27, emphasis in original). Greenleaf explained how we can identify servant-leaders:



Do those served grow as persons? Do they, *while being served*, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? *And*, what is the effect on the least privileged in society; will they benefit, or, at least, not be further deprived? (p. 27, emphasis in original)

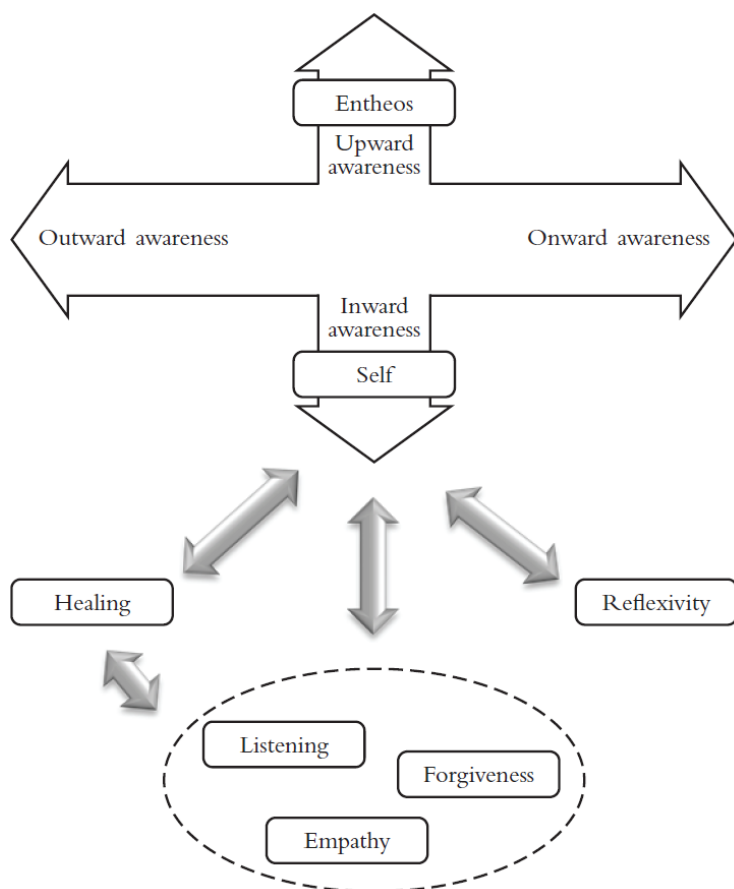
In Greenleaf's writings, Spears (2002) has identified 10 characteristics of a servant-leader: listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community.

Based on Spears's (2002) 10 characteristics of a servant-leader and my research study, I constructed a servant-leadership model (Figure 3). Empathy, listening, awareness, and forgiveness contribute to healing; healing, listening, and reflexivity (with conceptualization) lead to the growth of *entheos*; and the growth of *entheos* results in better awareness (Song, 2020). *Entheos* comes from the Greek word *ένθεος*, which literally means "in God." By *entheos*, Greenleaf (2003) meant "the power actuating one who is inspired" (p. 118). These characteristics of servant-leadership interweave with one another to bring out better awareness in servant-leaders, so they tackle whatever issues are in front of them. Inward awareness (i.e., self-awareness) can help leaders understand their own strengths, weaknesses, emotions, and concerns, as well as the impacts of their actions. Upward awareness (i.e., spirit-awareness) can shape a leader's *entheos* and nurture his or her oneness and wholeness. Outward awareness (i.e., other-awareness, relation-awareness, and situation-awareness) can move a leader toward stewardship, including persuading people through word and deed, committing to the growth of people, and building community. A person with relation-awareness and situation-awareness is able to identify situational, historical, religious, cultural, and social elements in a



complex situation. All of these forms of awareness take place with onward awareness (i.e., time-awareness); and the awareness of the future leads to foresight (Song, 2020).

Figure 3: *Servant-Leadership Model*



Source: Song, 2020

In the 1970s, Greenleaf (1977/2002) observed that “the sense of business responsibility is inadequate for the influence that business



wields” (p. 66). This statement is even more true today. For years Greenleaf made the strongest pleas he could for major institutions to “become affirmative (as opposed to passive or reactive) servants of society” (p. 170). In 1974, the first unequivocal response came to him from a large multinational business (Greenleaf, 1977/2002). In his proposal to the directors of this company, Greenleaf said, “If directors want a more socially responsible company . . . they should start the process by becoming more responsible directors” (p. 175). GDFL, as a socially responsible company founded in 2006, is the result of the efforts of two responsible leaders—Franck Riboud and Muhammad Yunus (Danone, 2020).

Greenleaf (1977/2002) recognized that the core reason so few business serve well is “not in business institutions; rather, it is in the attitudes, concepts, and expectations regarding business held by the rest of society” (p. 149). People inside and outside business do not love business institutions (Greenleaf, 1977/2002). Greenleaf claimed, “Businesses, despite their crassness, occasional corruption, and unloveliness, *must be loved* if they are to serve us better” (p. 149, emphasis in original). How can you love an institution? You cannot. You love the people and the people are the institution (Greenleaf, 1977/2002). A centerpiece of Greenleaf’s work and writing is the principle of love (Tilghman-Havens, 2018). Van Dierendonck and Patterson (2015) argued that compassionate love is an antecedent to servant-leadership and the cornerstone of the servant-leader and follower relationship. If a mechanistic cog-and-wheel perspective of institution is replaced by an organic servant-led perspective, traditional, hierarchy-driven, and command-and-control leadership models will yield to participative, value-driven, and people-oriented models. When you are asked, “What are you in business for?,” you can use Greenleaf’s (1977/2002) words to answer: “I am in the business of growing people” (p. 159).



But how can servant-leaders be loving and responsible during a crisis, such as this COVID-19 pandemic? I was hoping to find out through this hermeneutic phenomenological study.

METHODOLOGY, METHODS, AND PARTICIPANTS

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study is to explore the essence of corporate social responsibility and crisis leadership through the lens of servant-leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic with a sample of business leaders in the United States. I adopted a qualitative approach because it is able to bring unanticipated perspectives into the study, instead of being tightly prescribed; in addition, it can provide a holistic picture of the phenomenon, rather than looking for causal relationships among variables (Creswell, 2013).

This study employs semi-structured interviews to gain an in-depth understanding of the lived experience of business leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic. I obtained Institutional Review Board approval and participants' informed consent before collecting the data. A background question sheet was used before the interview to collect participants' demographic information. A one-hour interview session via Zoom was conducted with each participant to understand their lived experience. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. I conducted a first cycle of open coding and a second cycle of pattern coding during data analysis using ATLAS.ti.

The qualifications of this study's participants include having diverse experiences of the topic under study (Laverty, 2003), the ability to articulate their experiences (Colaizzi, 1978; van Kaam, 1966; van Manen, 2016), and the willingness to participate (Laverty, 2003; van Kaam, 1966). I found my participants through the connections of the editors of the *International Journal of Servant-Leadership*. The organizations of these participants either explicitly



or implicitly integrate servant-leadership into their missions and visions. The sample size in hermeneutic phenomenological research can vary from one to hundreds (Creswell, 2013; Dukes, 1984; Polkinghorne, 1989). This study's sample is comprised of three male and three female American business leaders who were willing and able to articulate their business management experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic (Table 1). Pseudonyms were used in all data for the sake of confidentiality.

Table 1: *Participants' Background Information*

	Luis	John	Luke*	Mary	Bella	Sara
Gender	Male	Male	Male	Female	Female	Female
Age	48	53	40	52	51	65
Ethnic Identity	Hispanic	Caucasian	Caucasian	Caucasian	Caucasian	Caucasian/Hispanic
Education	Master's degree	Master's degree	PhD	PhD	Master's degree	PhD
Religion	Christian	Christian	Christian	Christian	Christian	Christian
Size of the Organization	800 employees	320 employees	400 employees/5 partners	1800 employees	9 full-time and 400-500 employees seasonal	2300 employees
Business Type	Nonprofit	Nonprofit Higher Education	Nonprofit Higher Education/For-profit	Nonprofit Higher Education	For-profit	Nonprofit Higher Education
Position and Years	CEO, 3 years	President, 13 years	Professor, 11 years/Managing partner, 9 years	Vice Provost, 16 years	COO, 4 years	Chancellor, 10 years

*Luke works for two organizations at the same time.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Four major themes emerged from the interviews with the six participants: (a) care and concern for other people were overwhelming across all participants, (b) the five principles of crisis leadership were well supported, (c) the model of 3Ps and CSR as the core of business was partially supported, and (d) not all elements of Song's (2020) servant-leadership model were reflected during the interviews.



Theme One: Care and Concern for Other People

All participants were asked about their engagement with stakeholders during the COVID-19 pandemic. Both female and male participants showed great care and concern for other people at the personal and institutional level, emotionally as well as financially. Sara emphasized “the dignity of every human being.” “No one really cares how much you know until they know how much you care,” John quoted. John cancelled two crucial fundraising events out of safety concerns:

We actually are not going to do either one of those events this fall because we think it’s going to be too risky for the population of individuals who come for that, those who are in the most vulnerable population. . . . So those are just a few ways that we’re trying to be sensitive to alumni, parents, friends, supporters, and fans in every one of those situations.

Before the pandemic, Luis had to divest six million dollars’ worth of programs at his institution, a move that involved substantial layoffs. After the divestment, they were able to serve two thousand more people (clients). But caring for employees laid off was one of his institution’s major concerns during the reconstruction process, as Luis explains:

When we divested of programs, we worked very diligently with other organizations and encouraged them to hire the individuals that used to be with us. It’s just incredible the way the team really paid so much attention and focus on that so that those individuals could have a job. So that was a big part of our focus and our effort; it was not to just get out of those programs because it was going to be good for us. There was an overwhelming concern for the people we serve and how they



were going to be served through another organization.

During the COVID-19, Luis had to furlough 60 more individuals. This move was painful:

We believe in serving our staff, and some of our staff are no longer with us. So that's hard for us because we feel that they are part of our family. We love them. We care very much for them and we're sad that they can't be with us today. . . . Painful for those individuals; painful for us that we need to separate with [them]. . . . I started making those calls. . . . I just wanted to thank them for the tremendous work that they have done in some cases for years: improving the health and well-being of the people we serve and making significant contributions to this organization. . . . They were very appreciative. They learned so much from the organization, they were treated so well, they [had] nothing but good to say about [us]. So I thought it was important for me to just thank them, but then I heard a lot of just really positive feedback as a result of making those calls.

Mary's institution supported its employees during the pandemic:

We have in fact been able to pay those employees who are unable to work from home because their job isn't conducive to that. So even though they have been home since mid-March, they are getting their full paycheck because of our care and sense of responsibility for them as [our] employees.

Both Sara and Luke's institutions serve students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. During this pandemic, they knew that some students did not have a laptop or internet at home, so they provided these students with computers or hot spots for internet. Sara's institution also provided food through food banks to help



students and families in need. Luke pointed out, “The question as leaders we should always be asking is, ‘What does this person need from me?’”

Luke summarized five changes to make things better for students: keep it simple, create engagement (for online learning), be flexible, reach out and follow up, and get feedback. Luke encouraged conversations in his class to serve students:

I've had a couple classes that it didn't cover a bunch of content, but we certainly talked about what people are doing and it's not always me saying “Let me help.” There will be another student say, “Hey Jeff, I can help with that, and send me a message and we can help you.” So it's just kind of opened the door of conversations that I think are healthy and necessary for some people.

Sometimes care was shown through voluntary financial sacrifice. Sara's employees were willing to take a pay cut for everyone so that no one would be laid off. Similarly, Bella sacrificed her own paycheck to help her employees:

We just laid out everyone's plan and then I'm taking the brunt of the hit. I . . . significantly lowered my paycheck to help the team to make sure that everybody gets across the line. . . . I've been blessed. We'll just do what we can. . . . Money is dirt and used to grow beautiful things. . . . That doesn't mean much if you don't grow something beautiful with it.

These accounts confirm that love can serve as an antidote to leading out of fear and scarcity (hooks, 2000; Patterson, 2010).

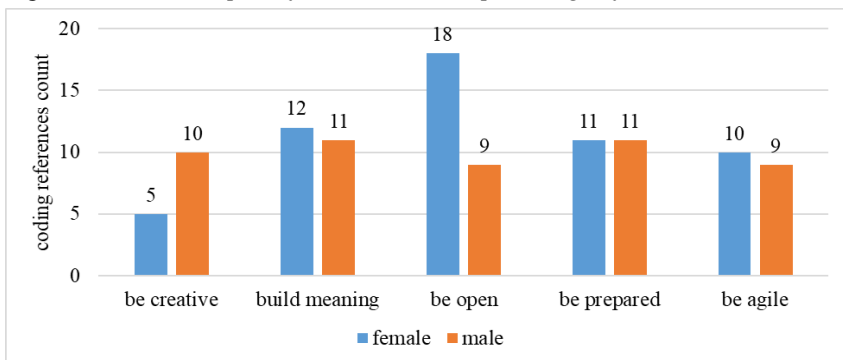
Theme Two: Five Principles of Crisis Leadership

Based on the literature review, I suggested five principles of



crisis leadership: be creative, build meaning, be open, be prepared, and be agile. All five principles were supported through the interviews. Both female and male participants showed equal attention to building meaning, being prepared, and being agile; female participants tended to be more open and talked less about innovation than male participants (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: *Five Principles of Crisis Leadership Coding References Count*



Be creative. This global pandemic pushed innovation to the top of these leaders' agendas. Luke said, "If we want to survive . . . we have to rethink the entire business model." Bella told her team, "We're going to have to think outside the box as far as how we do business." Mary told me that her faculty members were "redesigning their courses, redelivering the course through various media that they felt would be more responsive to students." Affected by state budget cuts, Sara said, "How to generate new revenue so that . . . we don't have to depend on the state as much? . . . A lot of innovation, saying, 'let's do something new and different.'" Luis' institution has already benefited from innovation,

On the revenue side, we implemented a Telehealth. So in February of this year we had zero Telehealth with zero



revenue. Today [June 2020] it comprises about 70 to 80% of our community-based services and about \$400,000 to \$500,000 of revenue per month. . . . The implementation of Telehealth provided us [with] the vehicle to serve thousands in the community that would not have been served if it weren't for that platform.

Building meaning. All of my participants are Christians. Faith is an essential part of their meaning building and sense making. They considered their jobs as God's calling and connected this calling with their institution's mission, vision, and values. They held onto this calling especially during this crisis. Sara told me that faith affected everything she did in every way because "a part of my faith . . . is this kind of a preferential love of the poor and so one of the things is to help the people who need it most." Luke pointed out that "the people who are really well grounded . . . are able to weather the storm [i.e., COVID-19] because they are grounded to some values that are meaningful and real . . . anchored to a set of . . . core values." Mary went through the reconstruction of a program with mission in mind, "to really understand that our mission was to make the world a better place to educate leaders that the world so desperately needs." She believes in chaos theory:

We as humans need to have something happen for us to be willing to rethink who we are, what we do, how we do it, and how we can do it better. So most of the time when things get difficult, I, like most humans, will on occasion say, "This is just so hard and I don't have it in me anymore to continue to do this work." But in those moments, I just say, "You know, things happen for a reason. There will be some good that will come from this. And we will become a better place. We will become a better institution."



When Bella became the new leader of her organization, leadership paradigm shifted from a hierarchical to a participative model. She created a new culture and established the discipline of “delight in difficulty”:

We wrote on the board “delight in difficulty,” so that was kind of our slogan. . . . First step, number one, as soon as I hear [bad news], I'm going to take a big breath and I'm going to say, “Thank you, God.” And then we're going to call the team together and we're going to pray together. We're going to say, “We're going to delight in this and we're going to trust God to have good come out of this.” And that's been a huge discipline. . . . Who would have known about the pandemic? Having that discipline in place allowed for us to hit this tsunami without capsizing. . . . [You] can't do that if you don't believe that there's something beyond you.

Be open. All participants admitted that they did not have all the answers during the COVID-19 pandemic and that they were open to learn and ask for help. Having learning attitude assumes humility and leads to innovation and collaboration. The section “Be Creative” already demonstrated some learning attitudes from these leaders and their institutions. All participants highly valued teamwork and collaboration during crises. Bella said, “The hardest piece was there was no playbook for this. It was so outside the rule box. . . . We were troubleshooting all the time, which is really exhausting. I think our team just handled it really, really well.” John admitted that at the beginning of COVID-19, “We didn't really know what we didn't know. We're just trying to learn more about the pandemic.” He tried to surround himself with the brightest people who were fully committed to the mission of his institution:

I don't have all the answers. . . . Other people are going to help



me make good decisions. We're not going to get it right every day. We're not going to make the decision right now. We're not going to get every decision correct, but we're going to try to do so from the standpoint of living out our mission and loving others with a Christ-like love, even in the hard decisions.

When Luis first became the CEO of his current organization, he was facing a two million dollars loss from the previous year. He was open to learn:

I started at the organization asking five questions: What are the biggest challenges the organization is facing? Why are we facing those challenges? What are some of our biggest opportunities for growth? What do we need to do to leverage those opportunities? And if you were me, what would you focus your attention on? It is the answers and insights to those questions that led to the development of a strategic plan that led to the transformation that we're going through right now.

Sara learned from every role and in every situation prior to the pandemic and kept learning during COVID:

There is a real openness to learning and doing what we need to do. . . . Lots of lessons about how to communicate, how to stay united and focused, how to respond to legitimate fear or concern about health and safety, and then the very legitimate questions about the quality of learning and the experience for students. . . . Every institution is going to have to do this, to look at the business model. How do we make it sustainable? What are new things you have to do? What are things we should stop doing? . . . Sometimes hardships bring opportunities that we don't see. . . . Once we face it, we learn things.



Be prepared. All participants were prepared in certain ways for crisis: strategic planning, attention to early alerts, timely decisions, and contingency plans. Long-term strategic planning sets the organization on the right track for success and survival. Before the pandemic, John's institution finished prioritizing its academic programs in order to strengthen the institution; Mary reconstructed some programs into a new school to "make it even stronger and more accessible and more nationally and internationally reaching." Two years ago, Luis divested six million dollars' worth of programs, resulting in serving two thousand more people and shifting the organization from deficit to profit. He said, "We had to make those changes in order to position us for success." When the pandemic hit, Luis said,

We have done some divestments during this time too. That is going to position us to do more good for more people because it's smart, it's strategic, and we have to make those decisions for the greater good of the organization and our community. . . . Instead of us losing 3.6 million dollars by the end of the year, we're going to be millions positive.

When early alerts of a crisis rose, these leaders were prepared and took actions quickly. When 911 occurred, Sara took immediate actions to keep her Middle Eastern students safe and then facilitate conversations among students to avoid misunderstanding. Rather than ignore the potential conflict, she called attention to it and got people to communicate, thus building respect and understanding. At the beginning of COVID-19, John sent students home immediately with all of their belongings. Mary required all study abroad students to return home at an early stage in spite of complaints and uncertainties. Bella said,



We kind of got some indication around March like something is not right. . . . I could have been thinking like “This doesn’t seem right. This seems more significant.” So I met with the team. . . . I said, “Okay, let’s take this to the most dire extreme. If we can’t . . . what are the things that we really want of ourselves to look back on to be known for?” . . . We kind of went to the full extreme talking about . . . how we want to navigate this.

Luke shared that one of his friends used up his own rainy day account so that he didn’t have to fire anyone during the COVID-19. Luke commented,

One of Greenleaf’s principles was foresight. And foresight doesn’t necessarily mean you know what’s going to happen, but it means you’re looking ahead far enough to know something could happen, right? And so I think the people who had foresight have listened well, whose general demeanor is about building others up. I think it’s a kind of just-been-tested leadership that they’ve done pretty well with. I think some of the others have had a lot harder time.

Be agile. Speaking of the COVID-19 pandemic, all participants talked about resilience, flexibility, and adaptability. “As a professor,” Luke said, “I [have to] be flexible.”

I need to be completely available to my students. . . . I give them my cell phone number. . . . I’ve got to meet them where they are and they are on their phones like all the time. And so I tell them, “You can text me. You can call me. You can email me. You do what works for you and I’m okay with it.”

John was impressed by the resiliency of his employees:



You learn a lot about people when you go through hard times or challenges together. And what I learned about our faculty and staff is just how resilient they are and even our students as well. How resilient they are and how much people love this college.

Mary saw the potential for changes in her institution:

I didn't think we would ever [make certain changes in the organization]. Now given what has happened, I wouldn't say that anymore. I think there will be some room for flexibility. . . . We are up to something that is challenging and difficult now, but something that will ultimately leave us with some realities to help us be better able to do our work and to be more resilient.

Sara called for entrepreneurship:

I'm very, very grateful for how much and how quickly all of our team, our faculty and staff and administration just jumped in to make things happen for the students. . . . [Students] are adapting and they're happy to be on campus, and so it's very fascinating to me that their adaptation has been fast. . . . I don't think we're going to go back to how it was, and so I think that is a long-lasting impact of the pandemic. I think that we will all need to be more entrepreneurial.

Bella considers this pandemic as a mini Ice Age: everything would be very different when we came out of it. She said, "I think greater flexibility is the name of the game. Like we're just going to have to be really flexible, flexible with ideas, flexible with implementation. Try it out, experiment, be as flexible as we can." Luis said,

What I have seen now is our ability to adapt very quickly. . . . Hundreds of people are working from home. And then also we

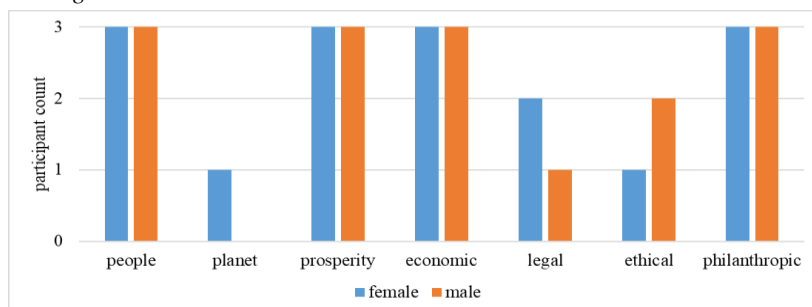


adapted our staffing model based on productivity. This has forced us to kind of rightsize the organization, something that could have maybe taken a three-year process. We were able to accelerate and do that more quickly. . . . I think this pandemic showed the strength of this leadership team and the organization and how we're able to overcome this unprecedented challenge, something we've never seen ever in our lifetime. . . . Not only overcome it, but also in a substantial way, make this organization better . . . because we were able to adapt, innovate and collaborate.

Theme Three: The Model of 3Ps and CSR as the Core of Business

I suggested that socially responsible organizations should make people, planet, and prosperity the inner core of its business and CSR (economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic responsibilities) its outer core. This model was partially supported through the interviews. Both female and male participants paid equal attention to people, prosperity, and economic and philanthropic responsibilities; only one woman talked about planet value; two women and one man touched on legal responsibilities while one woman and two men on ethical responsibilities (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: *The Model of 3Ps and CSR as the Core of Business Participant Coding Count*





Through this research study, people or social value reflected through Theme One was definitely part of the inner core for these institutions. Planet or environmental concern was only mentioned once by Sara: “Whatever we do in one part of the world impacts the other part of the world.” This problem came from one of the limitations of this study—all participants were in a service business. I will discuss more about research limitations later.

Prosperity, according to Kraaijenbrink (2019), is realized through economic impacts such as employment, innovation, and taxes. Caring for people, not only physically and emotionally but also financially, contributes to these people’s prosperity. Bella cut her own pay in order to help her employees. At Sara’s institution, everyone was willing to take a pay cut so that no one would be laid off. For the prosperity of the community they served and their institution, Luis had to divest some programs before the pandemic. Luis did not simply lay off people; he tried to connect with them and help them get hired by other companies. Being creative through implementing Telehealth enabled Luis’ institution to serve more community members and brought in hundreds of thousands dollars of revenue per month during the pandemic. John’s, Luke’s, and Luis’ institutions received greater support from their donors during the pandemic, and they were very grateful for that. All participants shared the value of a good team and partnership. Sara told me the story of how local businesses would rather sacrifice their sales to help teachers protect students from gang violence. “It takes a village,” she said. Prosperity is more than just economic value; it is people and community being prosperous with the support from one another. It is the “flourishing of all” (Tilghman-Havens, 2018, p. 120). It is bell hooks’ (1984) vision of “reorganizing society so that the self-development of people can take precedence over imperialism, economic expansion, and material desires” (p. 26). It is



Tutu's (1998) *ubuntu*, "a person is a person through other persons" (p. 19).

All participants were under the pressure of economic responsibilities. They talked about their financial difficulties due to the pandemic, gaining or losing financial support, and serving their students or clients through funding or refunding. Strategic planning and foresight had strengthened some institutions before the pandemic hit. Through learning and innovation, these leaders strove to stabilize their institutions and increase revenue. Three participants touched on legal responsibilities during the interviews while three mentioned being ethical and doing what is right. Luke said, "Choose the harder right instead of the easier wrong." Luis explained why he had to furlough some people due to the pandemic:

If you look at the organization as a whole and our responsibility to our mission, the viability of the organization, and the people we serve, we feel that we did the right thing and we can justify the thing even though it's painful.

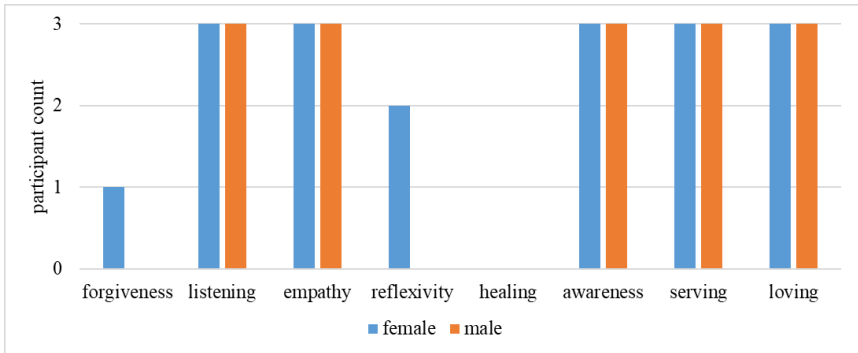
All participants assumed philanthropic responsibilities through their institution's mission and values to give back to society and to improve the quality of life. This result is partially due to two limitations of this study: five out of six participants are from nonprofit businesses, and all participants were identified as servant-leaders.

Theme Four: Servant-Leadership Model

Not all elements of the servant-leadership model in Figure 3 were present in every interview. All female and male participants exhibited listening, empathy, and awareness; only one woman talked about forgiveness and two women showed reflexivity; nobody touched on healing (see Figure 6). The themes of serving and loving others were strong across all participants.



Figure 6: *Servant-Leadership Model Participant Coding Count*



Forgiveness was mentioned by only one female participant, but it was a life-changing experience and the foundation upon which to build the culture of her institution. All participants demonstrated listening since they were open to learning and asking for help. Although communication is an important skill for servant-leaders, “intense and sustained listening” is even more important because “true listening builds strength in other people” (Greenleaf, 1977/2002, p. 235, 31). As discussed in Theme One, they all showed great empathy to other people during a crisis. “People grow taller when those who lead them empathize” (p. 35). Only two women touched on reflexivity by inviting her team to reflect on what they did and what they could have done better. Nobody talked about healing during the interviews.

All participants demonstrated the four dimensions of awareness. Upward awareness (i.e., spirit-awareness) was exhibited through their faith and meaning making during a crisis. Entheos was in the center of their upward awareness. This study confirms that spirituality can be a crucial component to leadership effectiveness (Howard, 2002; Ngunjiri, 2010). Inward awareness (i.e., self-awareness) was shown through participants’ awareness of their own



emotions (such as fear, stress, sadness, disappointment, embarrassment, sorrow, discomfort, and gratefulness) and limitations (by saying “I don’t have all the answers”). Parker Palmer (1998) emphasized the importance of a leader’s self-awareness: a leader “must take special responsibility for what’s going on inside his or her own self, inside his or her consciousness, lest the act of leadership create more harm than good” (p. 200).

All participants exhibited outward awareness: other-awareness through care and concern for other people, relation-awareness through teamwork and partnership, and situation-awareness through paying attention to early alerts and being prepared. Onward awareness (i.e., time-awareness), especially foresight, was reflected through being prepared and being creative. “Foresight is the ‘lead’ that the leader has” (Greenleaf, 1977/2002, p. 40). A lack of foresight in the past may result in an unethical action in the present (Greenleaf, 1977/2002).

The code group *serving others* had the most coding counts—34 times with all participants. On the one hand, this prevalence verified that the participants as servant-leaders; on the other hand, this result was due to the limitation of this study—all participants were from service businesses. They served others through owning personal responsibilities, being patient with one another, understanding others’ needs, thinking of others first, being flexible and adaptable, providing better service, making hard decisions, building networks to help others, cutting their own pay, and demonstrating care and love. Like John said, “Don’t think less of yourself, but . . . think of yourself less.”

No matter female or male, they all appreciated others’ love to their institutions and showed great love to the poor, to the people they served, and to their institutions. Mary said, “I think it is all



because of our love for the work that we do and the institution that we serve.” For Sara, it is “a preferential love of the poor and so one of the things is to help the people who need it most.” John told me, “We found out how much people really love this place [through the pandemic].” Luke’s love for his students was evident during the pandemic: “I’ve got to be available. I’ve got to be flexible. And ultimately I’ve got to think about ‘What is it that my students most need from me?’” When Bella was facing leadership transition and people leaving, she said, “That was a huge transition for me to help the team not only to transition people out,” but also “to help them feel deeply loved and part of our community and not forgotten.” Luis encountered similar challenges. He said, “We love them. We care very much for them and we’re sad that they can’t be with us today.” Luis also shared how much his employees loved the people they served and how they tried to connect with these people. He said, “The service, the love, and the care that we have for a client continues [during the pandemic].” The love of people and institution also generated discourse on gender-integrative approaches to leadership (Reynolds, 2014). When Bella became the leader of her institution, she considered:

How do I change team culture from a dominated personality style to more of a shared vision? . . . It was more like . . . the pyramid: ideas were generated from him [former leader] and then they were executed by others. And I really needed everyone to become more vocal, more engaged, more influential in the decision making rather than just saying yes.

SUGGESTIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Based on these findings and development of theory, some suggestions may be helpful to leaders. First, the five principles of



crisis leadership—be creative, build meaning, be open, be prepared, and be agile—can help leaders navigate dire times, but the foundations of these principles should be built ahead of time. In other words, these principles would be valuable only if leaders establish them with foresight. Foresight enables servant-leaders to understand the lessons from the past, see and rise above the events in the present, and foresee the consequences of a decision for the indefinite future (Greenleaf, 1977/2002; Spears, 2010).

Second, the model of 3Ps and CSR as the core of business can offer valuable insights to business leaders even though the application of planet value and legal and ethical responsibilities were not extensive in this study. This model using the layers of the earth analogy overcame the hierarchical and sequential limitations of Carroll's (1991) CSR pyramid. This model also integrated Elkington's (2018) 3Ps into CSR. Positioning people, prosperity, and planet as the inner core and economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic responsibilities as the outer core of business provides business leaders with a sustainable model for socially responsible success.

Last but not least, listening, empathy, awareness, and foresight are crucial characteristics for a servant-leader, especially during crises. Luke said, "I think servant leadership is . . . a way of life that helps you stay grounded." This research also supports the idea that awareness has four dimensions: inwardness, upwardness, outwardness, and onwardness (Song, 2020).

Some limitations emerged from my study and further research is needed. First, all of my participants were from service business and five of them worked for nonprofit organizations. This sample could have predicted the overwhelming evidence of concerns for other people and serving others. The results may not be identical for



leaders from all business types. Second, planet value was not evident in this study due to the limitation of my sample and my interview design. All participants worked in service business; therefore, environmental concerns were not part of my interview protocol. Third, legal and ethical responsibilities were not extensive in this study because they were not built in my interview protocol. The purpose of this research was to explore the lived experience of servant-leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic, not to test the model of 3Ps and CSR as the core of business. Generalization is not the purpose of hermeneutic phenomenological studies, but transferability is important for the theories of crisis leadership, CSR, and servant-leadership. Because of these three limitations, further research in for-profit merchandising and manufacturing business fields is needed to enrich the understanding of crisis leadership, CSR, and servant-leadership and to test the model of 3Ps and CSR as the core of business.

CONCLUSIONS

Servant first or survival first? How do servant-leaders lead during the COVID-19? The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to examine the lived experience of both female and male servant-leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic and to explore the essence of corporate social responsibility and crisis leadership through the lens of servant-leadership. Three male and three female business leaders from one for-profit and five nonprofit organizations participated in the interviews. Through data analysis, four major themes emerged: care and concern for other people were overwhelming across all participants, the five principles of crisis leadership were well supported, the model of 3Ps and CSR as the core of business was partially supported, and not all elements of Song's (2020) servant-leadership model were reflected during the interviews.



This research does not answer all the questions asked during a global pandemic, but does provide leaders with insights on how to lead in crisis and how to build a socially responsible organization. First, the five principles of crisis leadership—be creative, build meaning, be open, be prepared, and be agile—used with foresight, can be valuable tools to help leaders navigate crisis. This study confirms that both female and male leaders lead well during a crisis through building meaning, being prepared, and being agile; female leaders tend to be more humble and open while male leaders tend to focus more on innovation. Second, by integrating Elkington's (2018) 3Ps into CSR, I suggested a new model to replace Carroll's (1991) CSR pyramid: people, prosperity, and planet as the inner core and economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic responsibilities as the outer core of business. This new model was partially supported due to some limitations of this study. Further research is needed to test this model, but this study shows that both female and male leaders value people, prosperity, and CSR responsibilities.

Finally, during a crisis, servant-leaders demonstrated the desire to serve, a love of others, and the characteristics of listening, empathy, awareness, and foresight across different genders. This study proves that servant-leaders honor both feminine and masculine giftedness and lead through a gender-integrative approach. The significance of this study is to enrich the understanding of crisis leadership, CSR, and servant-leadership across gender and to provide the model of 3Ps and CSR as the core of business. This study offers insights and tools for business leaders to lead during crises.

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