

## Leadership Challenge in Maintaining the Travel Business During the Covid-19 Pandemic

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**Abstract.** The leadership of travel agents needs to respond to the crisis of the impact of Covid-19 in maintaining the travel business. This requires the professional ability of the company's leadership to maintain the business. Some travel agents who can survive are also trying to find strategies to create positive activities and increase the motivation of all company employees. Therefore, the goal of this study is to establish the competence of travel agent leaders and travel agent companies' leadership strategies in maintaining human resources during the pandemic of Covid-19. This study uses a qualitative approach. Conducting semi-structured interviews and using documentation studies with analytical techniques in the form of reduction, presentation, and conclusion of the data found from the interview dept to the leadership of the Travel Agency Company is a data collection technique carried out by researchers in this study. The result of this study is that leaders need to adapt 5 (five) practices and competencies of leadership to survive during the Covid-19 Pandemic crisis. All the competencies of the leaders can be applied by supporting the strategies. The strategies are maintaining the human resources, the opportunities for finance, innovation for a new working system, develop new business products by market needs. The implication of this research is expected that travel agency leaders will have the competencies and strategies to adapt to other business crises with strategic company goals, visioning, risk taker, and a sense of entrepreneurship.

**Keywords:** Leadership Competencies  $\cdot$  Strategies in Crisis Time  $\cdot$  Travel Agents  $\cdot$  Covid-19 Pandemic

## 1 Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused damage globally and nationally, such as in critical sectors of travel and tourism. The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), in March 2020, published that the COVID-19 pandemic had a devastating impact on the entire world tourism value chain. Nearly 80% of small and medium enterprises in the tourism sector were so severely affected that millions of livelihoods worldwide had to close their businesses. As reported from the website kemenparekraf.go.id [1], since January 2020, foreign tourist visits to Indonesia have decreased by 7.62%

compared to the number of foreign tourist visits in December 2019. According to the Chairman of the Association of Indonesian Tours and Travel Agencies (ASITA) West Java, nearly 90% of ASITA members are temporarily closed until April 2020 due to a lack of tourist traffic as the main business.

According to Dirani, employees are the most valuable asset that must be maintained by the company [2]. However, during the Covid-19 Pandemic crisis, as one of the strategies so that their business is still able to run, many leaders of travel agent companies have downsized employees [3]. The downsizing of employees is not following the theory presented by Dirani because the leadership has not been able to maintain one of the company's assets.

Leaders need professional skills in making decisions because giving up their most valuable asset is undoubtedly not an easy thing for leaders. Professional skills and strategies to survive in times of crisis have become things that are needed by leaders and become new challenges that must be faced by leaders, to struggle with a problem in the company [2], especially during a crisis. Therefore, researchers are interested in knowing the leadership challenge, especially in leadership competencies and strategies in maintaining the company's business continuity during the Covid-19 Pandemic.

## 1.1 Pandemic Covid-19

Transmission of the Covid-19 virus substantially occurs through droplets or physical contact with people exposed to the Covid-19 virus. According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) analysis, the global economy has shrunk by at least 3% this year due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Simultaneously in Indonesia, Finance Minister Sri Mulyani predicts the Indonesian economy will be minus 0.4% this year since the first case of Covid-19 was announced in early March 2020 [4].

The Central Agency on Statistics (Statistics Indonesia) noted that in early 2020 the number of foreign tourists coming to Indonesia decreased. In January 2020, foreign tourist visits decreased by 7.62% from December 2019, when the number of foreign tourists only reached 1.27 million visits [5]. Then seeing the decline in the number of foreign tourists visiting Indonesia who came through the air entrance (airport), in January 2020, it decreased by 5.01%. The decline in the number of existing foreign tourist visits was due to the spread of the Covid-19 virus that occurred at the end of January 2020.

For travel agents, the Covid-19 pandemic has had quite a negative impact on their operational activities. The Chairman of the Association of Indonesian Travel Companies (ASITA) said that during the Covid-19 pandemic, travel agents in Indonesia were experiencing losses as of the end of March 2020, with a total loss of around Rp. 54.4 trillion. This loss is caused by the absence of operational activities that can be carried out by a company. Declining tourist visits are increasingly making travel agents paralyzed and unable to earn income as before the Covid-19 pandemic.

## 1.2 Travel Agent

According to Foster [6], travel agents become a liaison between users and service providers by arranging or planning tourist trips. Travel agents provide convenience and help for making business or leisure trips. Travel agents promote through social media

and communities and offer business travel packages directly to companies. According to Ferguson [7], travel agents have products in the form of air travel reservations, car rentals, accommodation, cruises, and tour packages. The COVID-19 pandemic crisis demands that travel agents and wholesalers must determine business decisions and priorities to sustain and recover business. The three central support systems that help maintain and build a travel business are financial support, marketing, and further business funding [8]. The complex nature of tourism products during the pandemic forces retailers to pay attention to information, negotiations, finance, ordering payments, physical ownership, promotions, and business risks [9].

## 1.3 Leadership Competencies

Kouzes and Posner [10] analyzed and found five leadership practices that leaders need to fulfill, which are as follows:

## Model the Way

Leaders set principles on how to direct employees to achieve organizational goals. Leaders set standards and set an example for their employees to follow. Leaders must discover their principles and then voice those values to employees.

## **Inspire a Shared Vision**

Leaders plan for the future by mapping out the possibilities that will happen. The belief that the organization can achieve something great in the future is a mindset that leaders must have. Leaders will involve others in carrying out the vision. In carrying out the vision, the leader must know the interests and convey them from the perspective of others. Leadership is a dialogue between leaders and employees, not a leader's command monologue.

## **Challenge the Process**

A leader is a pioneer. Leaders can step outside the safety zone and face the unknown. Leaders look for opportunities to innovate, grow and develop. Change involves experimentation and risk-taking. However, a leader will continue to move forward despite the inevitable mistakes and failures.

#### **Enable Others to Act**

Leaders cannot achieve goals alone. Leaders encourage collaboration and build trust. Give other people the opportunity to act and work well. Exemplary leaders work to make others feel strong, capable and committed. Development is carried out by leaders by strengthening the capacity of each person to achieve goals.

## **Encourage the Heart**

Employees feel valued and recognized for their accomplishments when leaders believe they can do the job to the best of their ability. The leader's job is to show appreciation for employee contributions and create an atmosphere that is always appreciated. Leaders make sure employees see the benefits of performance.

## 1.4 Strategy in Crisis Period

Wenzel [11] describes four strategies that can be applied to travel businesses in the context of Covid-19 and will have short and long-term impacts on the tourism industry.

## **Retrenchment Strategy**

This strategy relates to company activities by reducing costs, assets, product lines, and staff numbers and then focuses on the company's core activities. This strategy is the most common strategy for business turnover because it makes savings that contribute to the company's recovery, improve company performance and stabilize declining performance.

## **Persevering Strategy**

During this crisis, the company adopted an ongoing strategy to sustain business activities in response to the crisis. Many experts have proven that maintaining a strategy can make a better contribution to the company than carrying out strategic innovation in uncertain circumstances when the company has to cope with sudden changes.

## Renewal Strategy by Innovating

A corporate crisis can open up opportunities for strategic renewal of the company. According to Schmitt [12], the renewal strategy by innovating is defined as a firm's adaptation to a changing environment and also connects the company's ability to explore existing competencies and build new capabilities. The renewal strategy by innovating on marketing and collaboration can be a significant strategic response if the crisis lasts for a long time and companies are required to explore other sources of income.

## **Exit Strategy**

The exit strategy is related to portfolio reorganization, business restructuring, divestment, product/market positioning, or cessation of business activities. Based on previous studies, the exit strategy is helpful for strategic renewal and creates opportunities to establish new businesses. This strategy is essential in the development process for the company. An exit strategy may be unavoidable and can even be used as an effective way to deal with crises at any time [13].

## 2 Research Methodology

This research is qualitative research with a focus on the purpose of knowing leadership competencies and leadership strategies in the travel business during the COVID-19 pandemic. The object of research is travel agents who are still surviving during the COVID-19 pandemic, with sources, eight leaders of travel agents in Bandung, Jakarta, Sukabumi, and Malang. The eight sources are Branch Manager of Golden Rama Bandung, Director of Bima Tour and Travel, Owner of PT Interlink, Manager of Padma Tours Bandung, Ticketing Manager of AntaVaya, President Director of PT Andalan Usaha Cemerlang (AUC), President Director of Barokah Tour and Travel, and also Founder & CEO of Malang Travelista.

Researchers conducted in-depth interviews with the eight leaders of travel agents in Bandung, Jakarta, Sukabumi, and Malang as a data collection technique, with interview guidelines as a data collection tool. The questions posed to the resource persons were regarding the leadership competencies and strategies of travel business leaders during the Covid-19 pandemic. After the data is collected, then data analysis is carried out using the interactive analysis technique described by Miles and Huberman, where the data obtained will be reduced, then presented, and conclusions are drawn [14].

## 3 Result of Analysis and Discussion

Based on the results of interviews with the source person using interactive analysis, the authors get the results in the form of:

# 3.1 Competencies of Travel Agent Leaders in Maintaining Company Business During the Pandemic

According to Kouzes and Posner in The Leadership Challenge theory [10], five leadership practices can be applied to overcome problems and guide companies to achieve goals. Based on Table 1, it was found that not all leaders in this study applied the five leadership practices. The following is the description of the results and discussion of the competence of the travel agent leadership:

## Model the Way

The pandemic is a surprise that cannot be avoided by all leaders of travel companies. The company values that before the pandemic was prepared with standards to achieve the company's goals with employees can no longer be carried out during the Covid-19 crisis. During a pandemic, travel agent leaders must mobilize all their management capabilities to determine and choose models and ways to maintain the company. Travel agent leaders are required to have the ability and high confidence in the principles of maintaining the company during the pandemic. The commitment to maintaining the company is why travel agent leaders make tough decisions during times of crisis. One of the tough decisions that must be taken by the leadership of a travel agent company is starting with salary cuts, downsizing employees, and laying off employees. Action decisions taken for employees are made with detailed considerations by comparing the company's conditions with the needs of employees during the pandemic. Some leaders of travel agent companies in the large company category took action only to lay off some employees, while small travel agents had to decide to lay off all their employees. Policies and model decisions on how to downsize to lay off employees are taken because the company's financial condition is getting worse from time to time. The poor financial condition is caused by the company's operations in the business of getting profit stopped, but the company's expenses, both on fixed costs and variable costs of the company's operations, cannot be avoided.

	Model the Way	Inspire a Shared Vision	Challenge the Process	Enable Others to Act	Encourage the Heart
Indicator	Leaders' response to the COVID-19 pandemic	Leaders predict conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic and determine the vision for the future with human resources.	Leaders' ability to innovate and take risks during the COVID-19 pandemic	Leaders' ability to involve all employees in facing the crisis during the COVID-19 pandemic	Leaders' ability to give appreciation to employees for their contribution during the COVID-19 Pandemic
N1	V	V	V	V	V
N2	V	V	V	V	V
N3	V	V	V	V	V
N4	V	V	V	V	_
N5	V	V	V	_	V
N6	V	V	V	V	_
N7	V	V	V	V	V
N8	_	V	V	V	_

Table 1. Travel Agent Leadership Competency Data

## **Inspire a Shared Vision**

Leaders have a future-oriented view, not only concerned with current conditions. The travel agent's leader hopes that the pandemic situation will end soon so that product development and company operational activities can be carried out again. A vision is a set of phrases that describe the ideals and dreams an organization or company should achieve in the future [15]. The main vision during the pandemic is how the company must take it to maintain the company's sustainability going forward. This vision is achieved by involving the company's core employees, namely the manager level and the supervisor level. The resulting new vision is a vision created by adjusting the conditions of travel companies during the pandemic. The resulting vision often has to change due to the uncertainty of conditions during the pandemic. Policies and travel rules from national and international governments that change frequently cause uncertainty about the vision that will be taken by the leadership. The vision and mission during the pandemic must be continuously conveyed, analyzed, discussed, and obeyed by all travel agent employees. Transparency and openness about the actual condition of the company must be continuously monitored and communicated to all travel agent employees. Travel agent leaders must be able to map out both positive and negative conditions from the impact of COVID-19. This very unfavorable condition must be accepted by each party, both management and employees of the travel agent company. Travel agent leaders must be open to all inputs, both strategies for maintaining the company and other product innovations that can help maintain the company during the COVID-19 period from management and employees.

## **Challenge the Process**

During a pandemic, a leader is a person who must be able to make decisions that are not as usual. The uncertainty of the condition of travel companies during the COVID-19 pandemic forced leaders to get out of the comfort zone that is usually done in normal times. Each company tries to find new opportunities and innovations to keep company from going bankrupt. Decisions for determining innovations and new strategies are taken quickly and consider the risks taken both for the company and for the company's employees as the most crucial asset in the company. The period of uncertainty, when Covid-19 causes mistakes and failure to make decisions, is often unavoidable for travel companies. Travel agents generally conduct market research to map market or consumer needs during a pandemic. Travel agents made many new business innovations to maintain the company's financial condition with new businesses, namely shopping entrusted goods service, in the culinary field, conducting and selling virtual tour packages. The company's most difficult challenge during the pandemic is managing financial conditions that do not have certainty of income from the profits of the travel agent business. Travel agent leaders must rely on intuition, knowledge, and accuracy of decision-making in order to maintain the organization. Controlling employees' worries and fears of losing their jobs at the company is the most difficult challenge company leaders face. Travel agent companies are still trying to continue to give salaries to employees even though salary cuts must be made. Travel company leaders are still trying to pay for health insurance (BPJS) to give employees confidence in the company.

The Covid-19 pandemic requires travel agent leaders to change operational activities, start new businesses and develop new products. The main contribution of travel agent leaders is exploring ideas, realizing products, and implementing systems. The travel agent leadership applies the WFH (Work from Home) system to employees in order to follow the health protocols set by the government. Leaders are trying their best to maintain strong teamwork during this crisis.

## **Enable Others to Act**

Leaders cannot achieve goals alone. Leaders encourage collaboration and build trust, giving other people the opportunity to act and work well. Exemplary leaders work to make others feel strong, capable and committed. Development is carried out by leaders by strengthening the capacity of each person to achieve goals.

Cooperation is a critical competency to achieve and maintain performance. Leaders work to make employees feel strong, capable and committed. Travel agent leaders provide opportunities for employees to work well when WFH. Travel agent leaders direct employees to work from home, provide laptops, and provide internet. In uncertain conditions, travel companies permit employees to do other work to fulfill their needs. This can be done because the company also cannot provide certainty on the take-home pay that will be obtained by employees through the travel agent company. Nevertheless,

some travel agency leaders do not allow their employees to do other work outside of their primary job as company employees.

## **Encourage the Heart**

Employees are one of the most valuable assets that can lead a company to success. However, many companies reduce the number of employees to minimize operational costs during times of crisis, and at the same time, companies also expect greater performance from the remaining employees [2]. During the pandemic, employees are the most vulnerable assets and the most at risk of losing their jobs. Fostering strong cooperation and good communication regarding the condition of the company between management and employees is an award given by travel companies for employee contributions. Togetherness activities are often carried out by company leaders and employees. Travel agent employees know for sure how the company's financial strength is to keep them working for travel agent companies. Travel agents try their best to be able to retain company employees. Various ways are carried out so that the company's finances can meet the needs of employees even though they have to reduce salaries or leave unpaid leave to employees. Crisis communication is an integral part of crisis management and refers to frequent communication with employees about the current business situation. Hearing regularly from team leaders, providing perspective, and ensuring the health of those affected by the pandemic, is one of the core responsibilities of leaders in times of pandemics and business lockdowns. Leaders will have a more empathic response to the needs of their employees [16]. The hard efforts made by the leaders to retain employees include using the company's financial reserve savings to sell company assets, providing capital for employees to start new businesses, still bearing BPJS for employees, and providing benefits even though the company is in crisis. This action is a testament to the leaders' empathy for employees' fear of facing layoffs. Employees appreciate the actions taken by the leaders to maintain the company and employees.

## 3.2 The Travel Agent Company Leader's Strategy in Maintaining Human Resources During the Pandemic

Wenzel [11] describes four strategies for responding to a crisis that can be applied to the travel agent business. Based on Table 2, it is found that each leader chooses a different strategy in responding to the crisis in their business. The following is a description of the results and discussion of the travel agent company leadership strategy:

## Retrenchment Strategy

The realization of the survival strategy continues to be carried out by considering the company's internal and external conditions. The efforts to create business opportunities that have been carried out have not helped the travel business to maintain the company's financial condition as in normal conditions. Leaders of travel agents do much efficiency in the company's operations by doing WFH (Work from Home) as the government recommends. WFH helps companies save on expenses such as internet usage, electricity, and employee transportation. The retrenchment strategy must be considered by the company's leaders in order to survive in times of crisis. Applications for suspension of credit to banks, selling part of company assets, cutting employee salaries, and dismissing

	Retrenchment Strategy	Persevering Strategy	Renewal Strategy by Innovating	Exit Strategy
Indicator	Recovery strategy, improve and stabilize performance degradation	Strategy in maintaining the company	The strategy of renewal and innovation in the face of crisis	Strategy in generating new strategies to maintain the travel agent business during the COVID-19 Pandemic
N1	V	V	V	_
N2	V	V	V	_
N3	V	V	V	V
N4	V	V	V	V
N5	V	V	V	_
N6		V	V	_
N7	_	V	V	_
N8	V	_	V	V

Table 2. Travel Agent Leaders Strategy

employees were forced to be carried out. The downsizing of the number of employees is aimed at saving for the recovery of the company's business. Leaders need time to make downsizing decisions. The decision to downsize employees is not an easy thing for leaders to do. To maintain the sustainability of the company, the leaders need to carry out a retrenchment strategy as a response in times of crisis.

## **Persevering Strategy**

In times of crisis, most leaders apply an ongoing strategy to stay in business. Leaders pay attention to the company's internal and external factors before finally making a strategy. Monitoring the company's finances is an internal factor, then following the development of tourism information and travel regulations from the government becomes an external factor in making an ongoing strategy to maintain the company. A persistent strategy is maintained by travel agent leaders because, in uncertain times and circumstances, leaders avoid mistakes or discrepancies, which then lead to increased spending. Periodic monitoring of the company's costs must continue to be carried out while adjusting to the regulatory conditions issued by the government related to "travel regulation".

The strategy to survive during a pandemic crisis is to ensure that leaders can retain their employees. Employees become important assets and also help in company operations so that leaders will find ways to retain all employees. Increasing or upskilling employees is mostly done by companies through training webinars organized by associations and the government. In addition to human resources, travel agent companies

do much research on market needs to find out the need for future travel products when travel regulations begin to be relaxed. Travel Agents continue to improve the company's management to deal with crisis conditions. Travel agents also continue to take various ways to keep consumers' attention on the company by creating free virtual tours, making various promotional methods using social media, and compiling programs that can be sold to tourists after a period of travel restrictions. Although each travel agent leader has his way and strategy in retaining employees, this persevering strategy makes a good contribution for the company to survive in uncertain times because compared to making innovations, the persevering strategy is the most effective way to minimize the negative impact on the company.

## Renewal Strategy by Innovating

The COVID-19 pandemic is a challenge for the travel agent business. The leaders also make a renewal strategy by innovating with looking for innovation opportunities as a new strategy for the company. A renewal strategy is a company's adaptation to a changing and uncertain business environment. The activity carried out by the travel agent in this study is conducting WFH with a renewal strategy on remote monitoring of employee performance results. In adjusting to crisis conditions, the leaders created a new strategy, namely WFH (Work from Home), by providing supporting facilities for working from home. The facilities provided include additional fees for internet and medical devices.

The leadership also makes creative innovations in making new tour products according to market needs during the pandemic and after the pandemic. The company's leadership, together with the surviving employees, is trying to come up with new concepts and new business models that can be applied after the pandemic or during other crises that might occur in the future. New innovations continue to be made by trying to find a travel agent company's business work system that uses digital or high-tech to anticipate future pandemic conditions.

## **Exit Strategy**

Several leaders of travel agencies have carried out exit strategies in the form of changing and adding markets for their business products during this pandemic. Product replacement by switching from outbound tours to inbound tours, or from inbound tours to domestic tours, and encroachment into the government market are carried out by leaders to look for opportunities in dealing with the COVID-19 Pandemic crisis. The existence of product and market changes is expected to help the company survive and operate. Although the opportunities found are not certain to provide benefits for the company, the leaders have tried to stay productive during the pandemic. Due to the uncertainty in the regulations for inbound and outbound flights, the exit strategy changes the target market from the inbound to the domestic market.

Market changes are followed by changes in the tourism products offered to consumers. Mass tour products have changed a lot to special interest tours with small groups with the implementation of government regulations regarding the Cleanliness Health Safety Environment (CHSE) to provide consumer comfort and confidence in the products offered during the pandemic.

## 4 Conclusion

In times of crisis, travel agents need company and organizational leaders who have competencies that adapt the five competencies, according to Kouzes and Posner, to maintain their business. Strong leadership in times of crisis requires the ability and courage to take the smallest risks to the most severe risks, namely releasing company assets, namely travel agent employees. Travel agents that still survive generally apply a description of leadership according to The Leadership Challenge theory from Kouzes and Posner. Then, the results of the study show that according to Wenzel's strategy, all travel businesses that are still surviving apply Persevering Strategy and Renewal Strategy by Innovating, while the strategy that is rarely used is the Exit Strategy.

For future research, the researcher suggests discussing leadership competencies and leader strategies tailored to the current business situation, namely VUCA (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, Ambiguity). Other specific strategies that need to be taken and owned by travel agent leaders apart from those mentioned above are leadership such as visioning, risk-taking, and a sense of entrepreneurship.

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