

Crisis Management Plan (CMP) and Synergistic Leadership (SL) as the Key Determinant of Business Continuity (BC) over Volatile Outlook for Construction Organisations

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ABSTRACT

Crisis management, organisational resiliency, and business continuity (BC) have emerged as vital competencies for organisations due to the global disruption caused by various challenges including the Covid-19; especially within the construction organisations. The disruptions have posed a significant threat to the survival of businesses worldwide which in turn led to economic downturns which highlighting the need for effective strategies. This paper aims to explore the determinants of BC through qualitative interviews with experts from organisations that successfully navigated the riotous times. The research emphasises the importance of strategic leadership (SL), which was identified as vital for crisis navigation and ensuring BC. The findings establish a strong link between strategic leadership (SL), transformational leadership (TL), and charismatic leadership (CL) in both regular and crisis circumstances that proves it is important for organisations facing volatile business outlooks to prepare themselves in responding swiftly and effectively to environmental changes. This is hoped to guide organisations in adopting new paradigms to overcome crises and enhance their resilience.

Keywords: Crisis Management, Organisational, Leadership Style, Resilience, Business Continuity

INTRODUCTION

The construction industry that contributed RM140 billion annually is crucial to Malaysia's growth as the Minister of Works highlighted its ripple effects on sectors like engineering, manufacturing, hospitality, infrastructure, transportation, and finance. Since 2020, due to Covid-19, delays in construction such as delays in development agreements, and ongoing project imbalances significantly affect both the industry and related sectors as well as impacted the local and global economy (CIDB, 2020). The restrictions on construction projects due to the pandemic crisis have slowed economic growth, increased unemployment, disrupted the supply chain of construction materials, and driven up material costs which have led to project delays, the implementation of additional safeguards, and increased insurance implications (Gamil, 2022), as well as increased investment losses (Bsisu, 2020). The Malaysian construction sector has suffered several economic crises from 1974 to 2008 (Mukhtar et al., 2022) with the year 2020 showed that international construction had decreased from 3.1% to 0.5% (GlobalData, 2020). In construction management literature as compiled by Mukhtar et. al. (2022), numerous studies have addressed crisis management but largely focusing on specific aspects such as communication structures and its constraints, theory formulation, real estate analysis, contractual conditions, sensitivity, and obligation, organizational behavior, environmental and organizational factors, disorganization, reactive behavior, social adjustment, social network analysis, and preparedness, without fully exploring the management practices of construction organizations during crises.

On a microeconomic level, organisations had to react to numerous challenges in the short term. However, with vaccinations being introduced, organizations became more hopeful that the economic pressure from the COVID-19 pandemic would ease in 2021 (Radic & Herrmann, 2022). Nonetheless, ongoing mutations persisted to exert pressure on the economy. In an increasingly volatile business environment, managing a crisis effectively is a paramount aspect in Strategic Management of all organisations (Petronas, 2021). Organisations not only have to prepare for crises, but to expect them. An organisation's ability to not only to detect crises as they occur, but effectively respond and recover from them is increasingly under scrutiny. Therefore, it is believed that implementing a robust CMP by integrating BC can help businesses overcome any unforeseen catastrophic events. In particular, the concept of strategic CMP including BC plans has gone through a notable transformation. Achieving this desired resilience necessitates defining and implementing comprehensive methods and tools to support critical processes in case of dysfunction. Consequently, to help organizations meet these challenges, new paradigms have emerged (Frikha & Lamine, 2021).

When a crisis strikes, many leaders might assume that they should demonstrate to their stakeholders that everything is under control, nonetheless the crisis brings leadership issues to the surface (Desyatnikov, 2020). Hence, the overarching goal of the research is to explore the connection between crisis management and leadership in the CMP life cycle in ensuring business continuity.

Crisis Management Plan: The Life Cycle

Numerous researchers have deliberated the notion of a crisis in various manners. Table 1 listed the definitions of crisis which will be presented in sequence starting from the 1980s. This will expound the evolution for definition of the term 'crisis' based on the perspectives of differing researchers over the years.

Table 1. Crisis Definition Summaries

Definition of Crisis	Author
A precarious period or situation in which a definite change is imminent	Fink (1986)
A disruption that physically affects a system as a whole and threatens its fundamental conjectures and existential core	Mitroff (1992)
An unlikely, high impact incidents that threatens the continuity of the organisation	Pearson (1998)
An unpredictable situation that threatens critical expectancies of stakeholders and can severely impact an organisation's performance and generate undesirable consequences	Coombs (2007)
A harmful or threatening situation that is highly notable, unanticipated, and potentially disruptive	Bundy & Pfarrer (2017)

From Table 1, it is inevitable that researchers commonly understood crisis as an unexpected, high-impact event that threatens organisational survival, legitimacy, or core assumptions (Fink, 1986; Mitroff, 1992; Pearson, 1998; Bundy & Pfarrer, 2017). Despite variations in definition, scholars consistently characterise crises as situations marked by uncertainty, time pressure, and the need for non-routine decision-making (Coombs, 2007; Boin et al., 2017). If mismanaged, crises can result in severe operational, financial, and reputational damage (Bhaduri, 2019). This, in turn, presents that the organization should possess a plan of action and system to effectively manage those forthcoming scenarios (Boin et al., 2017; Sfakianaki et al., 2015).

Living in a tempestuous era underscores the importance of crisis management as a critical strategy for organizations, particularly in sectors vulnerable to a wide array of crises, such as the construction industry (Mohamed, 2020; Boin, 2010). Crisis management literature has evolved through multiple conceptual models, and researchers have developed various models in order to manage a crisis ever since. Therefore, a concise overview of the most popular models developed during different periods, offering solutions for organizational crisis management plan selection, is summarised in Table 2.

Table 2. List for Crisis Management Models characteristics

Model	Characteristics of Crisis Management Model
Petak (1985)	Instituted in four stages that are: mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery
Fink (1986)	Settled on four stages starting from prodromal stage, the acute stage, the chronic stage, and finally the resolution stage
Mitroff (1994) Mitroff (2005)	Includes five stages (i.e., signal detection, probing and prevention, damage containment, recovery, and learning). Incorporate the redesign stage that is the after learning into Mitroff's (Mitroff, 1994) model
Boin et al. (2017)	Based on five critical challenges that governmental leaders experienced in the real crisis management process that includes sense-making, decision making, meaning making, terminating, and learning from crisis
Coombs (2007)	Composed of three stages : pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis

While early frameworks emphasised linear stages such as mitigation, response, and recovery (Petak, 1985; Fink, 1986), later models adopted a more dynamic and learning-oriented perspective (Mitroff, 1994; Mitroff, 2005; Boin et al., 2017). Despite differences in terminology, these models converge around three core phases: pre-crisis preparedness, crisis response, and post-crisis recovery and learning (Coombs, 2007). This study adopts this integrative life-cycle perspective, recognising crisis management as a continuous organisational capability rather than a one-off response mechanism.

As for Malaysia, Murad (2019) highlighted that crisis management research in Malaysia remains underexplored and largely untested and the focus has primarily been on crisis response and recovery rather than preparedness and prevention. This gap is reflected in the fact that 23% of construction sites in Malaysia remained inactive even after the government permitted operations (The Star, 2020). Hence, it is inevitable to note that effective crisis management involves detailed processes such as prevention, preparedness, response, recovery, and learning, which are essential for crisis reduction and ensuring business continuity (Kassa, 2021).

Leadership in Crisis

Leadership becomes particularly salient during crises, as uncertainty, stakeholder pressure, and operational disruption expose organisational vulnerabilities (Desyatnikov, 2020). Leadership involves how leaders handle their roles, personal philosophy, and the situation they're in (Kowalski, 1999). In crises, leadership style plays an important role in mediating the relationship between crisis responsibility and perceived organisational sustainability (Jamal & Abu Bakar, 2017). Scholarly works explore leadership styles in crisis contexts, including transformational, strategic, and charismatic leadership (Desyatnikov, 2020; Buhagiar, 2023; Bader, 2023; Rowe, 2001; Samimi et al., 2020; Ho & Lam, 2021; Kamble & Mulla, 2020; Giebe, 2022). Leadership styles may change with context shifts, hence making it relevant to study the way leadership is expressed in crisis management (Brandebo, 2020).

Strategic Leadership

Strategic leadership refers to a leader's capacity to align organisational resources, decisions, and actions with long-term objectives under conditions of uncertainty (Rowe, 2001; Samimi et al., 2020). In crisis contexts, strategic leaders play a critical role in sense-making, prioritisation, and rapid decision formulation, enabling organisations to respond coherently while maintaining strategic direction (Farhan, 2021; Samimi et al., 2020). Besides, Klockner (2017) emphasises that leaders aiming for organisational resilience should possess adaptive leadership styles that focuses on human capital interactions, and knowledge sharing through social networks. This form of leadership is particularly relevant during the early stages of a crisis, when ambiguity is high and time for deliberation is limited.

Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership is usually advocates for the effectiveness in handling external crises (Desyatnikov, 2020). It emphasises motivation, trust-building, and adaptive capacity, enabling organisations to cope with disruption and change. In crisis situations, transformational leaders mobilise collective commitment, support employee well-being, and foster resilience by encouraging flexibility and shared purpose. Empirical studies consistently associate transformational leadership with positive organisational outcomes during periods of instability (Bader, 2023; Scheuerlein et al., 2018).

Charismatic Leadership

Charismatic leadership centres on vision articulation, emotional engagement, and confidence-building (Conger et al., 2000). Jamal and Abu Bakar (2017) discovered that charismatic leaders positively influence stakeholders in crises through effective communication, expressing positivity, understanding feelings, addressing concerns, and showing empathy. Crises reinforce faith in charismatic leaders, as they demonstrate confidence in crisis response, using opportunities to exhibit behaviours like self-sacrifice, providing security and direction, and emphasising collective identity (Bryman, 1993; Shamir et al., 1998).

Synergistic Leadership

Given the multifaceted demands of crisis environments, recent scholars suggests that effective crisis leadership often emerges from the integration of multiple leadership approaches rather than reliance on a single style (Haddon et al., 2015; Buhagiar, 2023). Synergistic Leadership Theory posits that leadership effectiveness arises from the interaction between leadership behaviours, organisational context, and stakeholder dynamics (Brown & Irby, 2003). In crisis management, synergistic leadership reflects the coordinated application of strategic, transformational, and charismatic leadership functions across different phases of the crisis life cycle. This is due to the fact that, there is no one-size-fits-all approach; claiming a specific style (charismatic, strategic, or transformational) as ideal for all crisis situations is not possible or sufficient (Haddon et al., 2015). Thus, this study builds on this perspective by empirically examining how such leadership integration supports organisational resilience and business continuity.

Business Continuity (BC)

Business continuity (BC) refers to an organisation's ability to sustain critical operations and recover from disruptive events while safeguarding stakeholders, reputation, and value-creating activities (Supriadi & Pheng, 2018). The COVID-19 pandemic exposed significant weaknesses in business continuity preparedness across industries, including construction, where project disruptions, supply chain breakdowns, and workforce constraints were widespread (Mukhtar et al., 2022; Chen, 2022). Due to that fact, the absence of formal business continuity strategies contributes to business failures during unexpected catastrophes (Low et al., 2010; Guy & Lownes-Jackson, 2010).

While crisis management focuses on immediate response and control, business continuity emphasises longer-term organisational resilience and recovery (Sawalha, 2015). Effective BC therefore requires integration with crisis management planning, leadership capability, and organisational learning mechanisms. Despite its importance, empirical evidence suggests that many organisations particularly within the construction sector continue to approach business continuity in a fragmented and reactive manner (CIDB, 2020).

METHODOLOGY

An exploratory research perspective was required to study the effects of leadership and determinant factors in ensuring business continuity. This research is motivated by the necessity to explore the potential key factors and strategies for maintaining business continuity in the construction industry with minimal disruption by referring to evidence of two (2) case studies related to oil & gas business and social security companies that have effectively overcome the initial challenges presented by the COVID-19 crisis in an exceptional manner. The successful story is based on findings from IPSOS Malaysia in 2020 where Petronas (oil & gas) ranked as the

most successful organisation in managing a crisis i.e.: Pandemic Covid-19 in Malaysia while EPF (social security) ranked at number three (IPSOS Malaysia, 2021). Oil and gas and social security organisations were selected due to their high exposure to systemic risk, regulatory scrutiny, and public accountability conditions that mirror the risk environment of large construction organisations. The intent was not sectoral comparison but extraction of leadership and crisis governance principles applicable to construction project ecosystems.

Qualitative research was conducted through an exploratory semi-structured interview as previous studies on business continuity used semi-structured interviews as the data collection method, such as those of Swartz et al. (Swartz et al., 2003) and Herbane et al. (Herbane et al., 2004). The selected experts are managers and above from both organisations and it took a few months to penetrate both companies for the interview session and to engage with the right experts due to their tight schedules. These experts are responsible for crisis management in their respective organisations; hence they were chosen as the Subject Matter Expert (SME) on this topic. The participants were requested to provide their insights and opinions on potential revival strategies for the construction industry during and post-pandemic. The following stages were implied to conduct the research which is illustrated in Figure 1. The data was analysed for thematic and content analysis towards identifying appropriate measures and determinant factors to minimize the impact of the pandemic on the functioning of the company and ensuring business continuity.



Fig. 1 Stages conducting the Research.

This study is exploratory in nature and is based on two in-depth expert interviews from highly resilient organisations outside the construction sector. While this limits statistical generalisation, the objective was analytical generalisation (Yin, 2018), whereby theoretical insights are transferable to contexts with similar volatility, regulatory complexity, and operational scale. Construction organisations share comparable risk profiles, project-based operations, and stakeholder pressures, justifying cautious cross-sector learning.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study draws on insights from two senior executives with extensive crisis management experience (over 10 years each) in highly regulated and risk-intensive organisations (as shown in Table 3). One respondent represents the oil and gas sector, while the other represents a national social security institution. Both organisations were nationally recognised for effective crisis handling during the COVID-19 pandemic (IPSOS Malaysia, 2021). Although limited in number, the respondents' strategic roles and direct involvement in crisis decision-making provide analytically rich evidence suitable for exploratory and theory-building research (Yin, 2018).

Table 3. Background of the Experts.

Experts	Experience	Qualification	Current Role	Organisation
E1	30 years	Doctorate	Head	Oil & Gas
E2	12 years	Bachelor's degree	Manager	Social Security

Ensure project running and business continuity during the crisis

Q1: How did the pandemic impact your organisation?

For this question, both organisations admitted the year 2020 was undoubtedly tested with the twin shocks of the Covid-19 pandemic and the economic plunging to an unprecedented low. Both Have consistently encountered uncommon market volatility alongside a complex political environment, a weakened currency, and unsettled geopolitical conditions, resulting in ongoing developments that shape the economic, financial, and risk

landscapes. This aligns with global trends of slowed economic growth (Gamil, 2022) and increased investment losses (Bsisu, 2020).

Q2: What are the main business challenges your organisation faced during the crisis?

According to E1, “Covid-19 is testing the resilience of countries and businesses. Petronas Group recorded a decrease of 78% to RM10.5 billion compared to RM48.8 billion in the previous financial year in line with lower revenue realised due to the pandemic and the effects of global plummeting oil price. Nonetheless, Petronas continued to operate cautiously and efficiently.”

While E2 highlighted that “EPF was not really impacted on its revenue, nonetheless, the most challenging part was to safeguard and grow its members’ retirement savings and ensure EPF is compelled to act swiftly as they embarked on bold and unprecedented initiatives to support their members and employers in navigating the headwinds. This included innovative financial facilities that offered relief to those facing financial hardship throughout the year”

This situation proved the increase in investment losses (Bsisu, 2020) that also reflected in the construction industry when according to estimates, the year 2020 showed that international construction had decreased from 3.1% to 0.5% (Global Data, 2020). For that, organisations had to react to numerous challenges in the short term.

Determinant factors that drive each process of crisis management

Q3: What efforts and primary strategies have been implemented to handle the crisis and address the business challenges?

The crisis has fundamentally altered global business operations. From a corporate governance point of view, it has underscored the essential role of leadership in guiding immediate recovery efforts as well as mid- to long-term strategies for adaptation and growth in the post-COVID era. According to Petronas and EPF, they asserted all stages of the crisis management plan that are driven by the organisation's leadership, including the CEO, executive team, and crisis management team. This is for the fact that, effective crisis management requires strong leadership that can make quick decisions, communicate effectively, and coordinate the organisation's response to the crisis.

According to Respondent E1,

"Petronas leaders consistently adhere to their strategies and implement timely mitigation measures, while also charting new paths for recovery and growth with full backing from the Petronas Board."

This proved that leaders responded promptly by taking decisive and prudent actions to enhance the resilience and sustainability of their operational and financial positions. These initiatives include intensified efforts in cost reduction, fiscal discipline, and improving productivity. These actions underscored the importance of leadership in planning responses and extracting lessons from crisis events, all while facing public scrutiny (Cania & Korsita, 2015; Buhagiar, 2023).

She added,

“...All plans are crafted not solely to eliminate risk entirely, but rather to strategically manage risk exposure across the business, while simultaneously capitalizing on any opportunities that arise. When we can ensure preparedness, then only we can ensure business continuity. The road ahead will require us to move forward with pace, while having the resilience to weather this long-drawn-out storm.”

E2 highlighted how EPF robustly moved forward through continuously enhancing its sturdy risk and crisis management system to remain relevant and resilient ahead of the ever-changing risk landscape ensuring risks are effectively managed within the organisation.

“The management is fully committed with its internal control system that consists of establishing the context by articulating the organisation’s objective and defines the internal and external parameters to be taken into account when managing a risk and crisis, risk assessment and risk treatment, communication and consultation, monitoring and remedy, and also record-keeping and communicating.”

Based on this, EPF Business Continuity Plan (BCP) is continuously refined based on current operational needs, ensuring perpetual organisational preparedness, and the framework encompasses all aspects of EPF. Its objectives are to foster a cohesive and reliable BCP, enabling EPF to respond adeptly to business disruptions, swiftly resume critical operations within specified timelines, and mitigate costs associated with damage and interruptions stemming from the crisis aftermath. This is in line with definition of BC by ISO (2019). In times of crisis, effective leadership can provide direction, clarity, and focus to the response effort. Leaders are responsible for setting the tone for the organisation's crisis management efforts. They need to ensure that the organization has a comprehensive crisis management plan ready and that all employees are trained in how to respond to a crisis.

Across both cases, leadership emerged as the central determinant influencing crisis preparedness, response, recovery, and learning. Rather than relying on a single leadership style, both organisations demonstrated an integrative leadership approach, dynamically combining strategic, transformational, and charismatic elements depending on crisis phase and situational demands. During the pre-crisis and early response phases, leadership was characterised by rapid sense-making, centralised coordination, and decisive action—features commonly associated with strategic leadership (Samimi et al., 2020). This enabled timely mitigation measures, resource reallocation, and continuity of critical operations.

In the active crisis phase, transformational leadership became more pronounced. Leaders prioritised employee well-being, fostered collective commitment, and encouraged adaptive problem-solving. This aligns with empirical evidence that transformational leadership enhances organisational resilience and performance during disruptive events (Bader, 2023; Scheuerlein et al., 2018). Simultaneously, charismatic leadership functions played a critical role in sustaining confidence and trust. Transparent communication, emotional reassurance, and clear articulation of organisational purpose helped mitigate anxiety among stakeholders which is an effect widely documented in crisis communication literature (Jamal & Abu Bakar, 2017; Shamir et al., 1998).

Leveraging leadership in bringing positive outcome in managing a crisis

Q4: How can leadership effectively harnessed to achieve positive outcomes during each phase of crisis management amidst crises, thereby ensuring business continuity?

During a crisis, strong leadership is critical to ensure that the organisation can be led to success even when the odds are against them. According to E1, *“In Petronas, leadership is leveraged in crisis management to effectively manage and overcome a crisis. Effective crisis management requires a leader who can make quick and informed decisions, communicate effectively with stakeholders, and coordinate the organisation's response to the crisis.”*

Leaders can help their organisations thrive in a crisis with constructive leadership skills. Effective leadership is critical to ensure business continuity during a crisis. For that, the experts (E1 and E2) suggest that leaders can leverage their skills and expertise to ensure business continuity by developing a crisis management plan, communicating regularly, making quick and informed decisions, prioritising employee safety and well-being, being flexible and adaptable, and planning for the future by identifying areas for improvement, and making changes to their crisis management plan to better prepare for future crises that is in line with Elliott et al. (2010) and Sawalha (2015).

Leadership and organisational resiliency

Q5: How do you think an organisation can be resilient during a crisis?

Despite all factors, the experts (E1 and E2) made a point that *“Leadership is critical to an organisation's resiliency, which refers to its ability to adapt and recover from a crisis or disruption.”*

Leaders set a clear vision for the organisation, and consider the risks associated with it. Communicating this vision guides decisions during a crisis. They foster a resilient culture, promoting teamwork, adaptability, and innovation through training and resources. Encouraging continuous improvement is crucial, even in stable times. For that, leadership in crises is diverse and complex. No single leadership style, like charismatic, strategic, or transformational, fit every situation (Haddon et al., 2015). Effective leadership can help organisations build resilience by firstly setting a clear vision. Thus, by leveraging these leadership strategies (synergistic leadership), organisations can build resilience and better prepare for and respond to crises and disruptions.

Above and beyond, based on both cases, findings indicate that effective crisis leadership is not anchored in a single dominant style but emerges from the synergistic integration of multiple leadership functions. This supports the argument that crisis contexts require leaders to continuously recalibrate between decisiveness and empathy, control and empowerment, and short-term survival and long-term sustainability. Synergistic leadership, as evidenced in both organisations, operates through the integrated alignment of crisis responses with long-term organisational objectives, sustained workforce motivation and adaptability, effective sense-making that reinforces trust and stakeholder confidence, and a strong learning orientation that institutionalises lessons for future resilience. This integrative leadership configuration reflects the core crisis leadership challenges identified by Boin et al. (2017), particularly sense-making, decision-making, meaning-making, and learning. The findings further support existing scholars that argues against the existence of a universally effective leadership style in crisis contexts, emphasising instead the need for adaptive and context-sensitive leadership approaches (Haddon et al., 2015).

Crisis leadership involves balancing tensions with rapid decisions ensure continuity but may limit input, while consultation can delay action. Effective leaders combine centralised governance with decentralised execution, maintaining strategy and flexibility which is the key in construction's fragmented, uncertain environment. Financial discipline must be balanced with workforce well-being and stakeholder trust to sustain long-term resilience (Wisittigars & Siengthai, 2019). These principles, though from non-construction cases, apply well to construction. Firms should move beyond rigid leadership models, cultivating synergistic capabilities via rotation, simulations, cross-functional teams, and post-crisis learning.

CONCLUSIONS

The world has evolved significantly since the 20th century, and leading an organization now demands a distinct skill set. This research contributes by offering insights into the practices necessary for developing a continuity plan and how these practices are implemented at Petronas and EPF, which can be adopted by organizations in the Malaysian construction industry. It demonstrates that business continuity under volatile conditions is not driven by isolated leadership traits but by the synergistic integration of leadership functions across crisis phases. While exploratory, the findings offer theoretically grounded guidance for construction organisations seeking to institutionalise resilience through leadership capability development rather than ad hoc crisis response.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Authors declare that there is no conflict of interests regarding the publication of the paper.

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