What Now? A study of leadership preferences among Dutch municipal employees during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Master thesis

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The COVID-19 pandemic had a substantial impact on Dutch public organizations, and on society as a whole. This study aims to explore the leadership preferences among public servants during times of crisis, and to make concrete recommendations for further research into the underdeveloped knowledge on public leadership preferences in times of crisis. To do so, semi-structured interviews were conducted with employees from the municipalities of The Hague and Gouda, during which they were asked to report their needs in terms of three leadership styles: laissez-faire, transactional and transformational. The study found that transformational leadership was preferred during the pandemic and encourages fellow researchers to verify this using quantitative means. Further recommendations include the reexamination of the usefulness of laissez-faire leadership and the usage of different leadership frameworks to touch upon other behaviors.

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1. Introduction

In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic 'formally' reached the Netherlands in the form of a package of measures to combat the rising number of infections. People were forced to work from home, children could not go to school and most public places were closed off. This 'social distancing'-policy reached a point where, in the winter of 2021, people were prohibited to leave their homes past 21:00, with minimal exceptions. The policy was met with great criticism, and the global crisis sparked a wave of research to evaluate and improve crisis management and public leadership, expanding this already vast field of scientific studies (Groeneveld, et. al., 2020-2024; Minderhout, et. al., 2021; Amrikhanyan, et. al., 2023).

This study aims to add to this scientific discussion by exploring the question '*what leadership preferences do public servants have in times of organizational crisis?'.* This matter has received little to no attention in existing literature. Research on the preferred leadership styles in times of ambiguity has often been conducted in the private sector (Bommer, Rubin & Baldwin, 2004; Giessner & Knippenberg, 2008). Public administration research often lacks the bottom-up perspective this study aims for (Zhang, Jia & Gu, 2012; Olsson, 2014), focuses on community- instead of employee-leadership (Boehm, Enoshm & Michal, 2010) or is not conducted in the context of a crisis situation (Van Breukelen & De Vries, 2011; Jacobsen & Andersen, 2015). The leadership styles to be studied are laissez-faire, transactional and transformational leadership. Laissez-faire leadership acts in a passive manner, trusting followers to come up with their own plans and solutions instead of actively engaging in the work process (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2022). Transactional leadership is an active style based on relations of exchange and is characterized by clear structures and rewards contingent with employee performance (Jacobsen & Andersen, 2015). Transformational leadership is active as well, but is focused on building personal and often emotional relationships with subordinates (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2022), and relies heavily on formulating and spreading a shared vision (Jacobsen & Andersen, 2015).

Expanded knowledge on the issue would be academically and socially relevant. A bottom-up view on leadership needs in a public organization during an organizational crisis would provide much-needed insights in this unfulfilled research niche. Furthermore, inherent to exploratory research, one of the main goals of this thesis is to find potential directions for further research, on top of answering the research question. The social importance of this subject is more practical in nature. With global problems like climate change and refugee flows continually on the rise, more public crises are bound to occur in the future. Further knowledge of employee preferences would allow public leaders to better suit their leadership practices to the needs of public servants. This, in turn, would facilitate an environment where public employees can work more effectively. This will give public servants an easier time coming up with policies to combat the societal effects of crises. Following this reasoning, it can be argued that further knowledge into leadership preferences in crisis situations is not only academically relevant, but also practically useful and important for public leaders, servants and, by extension, the entire community.

Based on existing research, it is hypothesized that public servants will not desire laissez-faire leadership practices when confronted with a crisis but will prefer a visible leader who displays elements from both transactional and transformational leadership, roughly to equal measure. Combining elements of public administration-, crisis management- and psychology literature, it is argued that the initiation of structure, exemplary behavior, high-quality communication and emotional support will be considered the most vital leadership behaviors for public servants.

To test crisis needs among public servants and gather data, semi-structured interviews were conducted with employees of the municipalities of Gouda and The Hague, who were recruited for the study through purposive and snowball sampling. They were asked to retrospectively report on their workplace experiences during the first two months of the COVID-19 pandemic. After illustrating their situation and changes therein, several leadership behaviors were presented. The participant was asked to assess the importance of those behaviors during the first two months of the pandemic, and to name changed personal preferences compared to before or after the pandemic, if applicable. Afterwards, the answers were coded to provide a statistical overview of the data and analyzed in depth to identify surprising or otherwise interesting mechanisms to be further studied by the scientific community.

This study found that transformational leadership was deemed most important by a significant margin, as was expected based on the literature review. However, due to the limited scale of this study and the fact that the data was gathered through interviews, these results are hard to generalize. It is therefore strongly advised to reexamine this research question using a quantitative research design. Furthermore, the chosen leadership styles were not the most suitable for this study, so it is encouraged to also conduct a similar study based on a different leadership framework. The 'Taxonomy of Leadership Behaviors' by Gary Yukl (2012) seems a better fit for further studies. The most surprising find, however, is that laissez-faire leadership was, on average, considered equally important as transactional leadership, despite the lack of empirical evidence for the effectiveness of this leadership style. This thesis therefore encourages the scientific community to make an effort to further study laissez-faire leadership and look for its merits, instead of dismissing this style as ineffective, as has been done so far.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Defining organizational crisis

To explore the concept of public employee needs during a crisis, the term 'crisis' has to be defined first. When thinking of the term 'crisis', associated ideas might easily come in the shape of a natural disaster, war or pandemic. Although these are good examples of crisis events, they are only cases of the most large-scale and often media-covered kinds of crises. In actuality, crises, particularly organizational ones, are often less widespread among society and more directorial in nature, like a top official being fired over a scandal or a fundamental disagreement splitting an organization in two. This section will define a 'crisis' on a more conceptual level in order to construct a clear definition to be used in this thesis.

With crises and handling them being studied in abundance, many definitions and taxonomies of the concept exist, but certain elements are vital. First, an organizational crisis is a situation that poses serious risks and consequences for the organization's performance, stability, operations, reputation, high-priority goals and/or stakeholder expectations (Seeger, Sellnow & Ulmer, 2003; Coombs, 2007; Spradley, 2017). Secondly, as soon as *any* group of stakeholders perceives a situation as personally, socially or professionally threatening, there effectively *is* a crisis, regardless of management views on the matter (Shamir & Howell, 1999; Seeger, Sellnow & Ulmer, 2003). Third, a crisis is unpredictable and uncertain in nature, and often comes as a surprise, even though most organizations have a standard procedure prepared for certain inevitable crises (Coombs, 2007; Spradley, 2017). Fourth, a quick and adequate response is necessary to reduce uncertainty and restore the organization on a desirable performance level (Zhang, Jia & Gu, 2012; Spradley, 2017). Lastly, a crisis can, if not handled effectively, have serious negative outcomes that often surpass financial loss, like a (permanent) tarnishing of the organization's reputation, environmental damage or injury to stakeholders (Coombs, 2007; Zhang, Jia & Gu, 2012). To summarize all this, the definition used in this thesis is the one formulated by Coombs: '*the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organization's performance and generate negative outcomes*' (Coombs, 2007, p. 2).

An organizational crisis is more than the main event that the general public remembers, but consists of a broader crisis 'sequence', comprised of multiple phases (Coombs, 2007). For example, the crisis that followed after hurricane Katrina did not only comprise the impact of the hurricane itself. The exposed weaknesses in preparedness and disaster response of national and local US governmental bodies should be considered a part of the crisis as well (Spradley, 2017). Most taxonomies distinguish three phases: incubation or precrisis, critical or crisis and aftermath or postcrisis (Stein, 2004; Coombs, 2007; Spradley, 2017). To stay with the example of hurricane Katrina, this would mean that all elements that form the buildup to the crisis event, like the multiple weather conditions that formed the hurricane, are in the incubation phase (Spradley, 2017). The critical phase is where the immediate effects of the 'trigger event' (in this case, the hurricane itself) are visible, like the damage to houses, but also the ripple effects of the trigger event, like the organizational crisis in local governmental bodies because it turned out they were poorly prepared (Stein, 2004). Finally, the aftermath phase consists of repair, in this case financial compensation for people directly impacted, but also entering a political process to ensure that governmental organizations will be better prepared in the future. This last phase is mainly aimed at restoring some stability and faith among stakeholders connected to the organizations involved (Spradley, 2017). These three different crisis phases each emphasize different needs in followers and thus require different responses from leaders (Sturges, 1994). In this paper, however, the focus remains mainly on the 'crisis' phase, where uncertainty is the highest.

2.2 Exploring crisis needs

As stated, a situation is an organizational crisis once one or more stakeholder groups perceive it as such. In this thesis, public servants and their needs are the stakeholders of importance. Given that an event like the COVID-pandemic was an event of a significant magnitude and with widespread consequences throughout society, it can be assumed that stakeholder needs, public servants among them, were influenced as well. Research on crisis management was such a significant part of public (and private) management studies that it has become a field of research largely independent from public administration, despite often dealing with related subjects. As a result, the amount of research on crisis needs stemming from the field of crisis management is far larger and often more specific than from public management. Regardless, research aimed specifically on public service employees' leadership in an organizational crisis is limited across both public administration and crisis management literature. However, by combining elements of both leadership and crisis handling from the fields of crisis management, public management and psychology, a general idea of employee needs in this specific situation can be assembled. These desires enable the identification of most suitable leadership styles, therefore laying the foundation for the hypotheses of this study.

2.2.1 Crisis Management: priorities, active leadership, charisma and communication.

From the field of crisis management, more is known about what citizens feel and need when the stability in their lives is threatened (Shamir & Howell, 1999; Boehm, Enoshm & Michal, 2010). When careers and livelihoods are on the line, people tend to become stressed, insecure and more dependent on others (Shamir & Howell, 1999; Halverson, Murphy & Riggio, 2004; Boin, Hart & Kuipers, 2018). In addition, particularly in natural disasters and wars, people tend to make basic needs like health, well-being and security the first priority for themselves and their dearest (Seeger, Sellnow & Ulmer, 2003; Boehm, Enoshm & Michal, 2010). Increased stress, insecurity and dependency on others are undoubtably applicable to the COVID-19 pandemic, overreliance on primary needs probably was not. Although people surely perceived the pandemic as a threat to their own good health as well as those of their dearest, livelihoods have rarely been threatened in the same magnitude as would be the case if those people would suffer a war or earthquake. Securities like food, water or shelter were also generally unaffected by the pandemic. It should be noted, however, that many people could experience the ambiguity and uncertainty of the early stages of the pandemic as a threat to their financial stability, given that nobody knew how organizations would change in this new situation.

This lack of stability and control makes people look to their superiors for guidance (Yusko & Goldstein, 1997). Sometimes, people lose confidence in their current leadership, and want to see people replaced (Boehm, Enoshm & Michal, 2010). Regardless of what shape the leadership takes or who executes it, most people express a wish for swift, decisive, or even authoritarian leadership to take control of the situation (Sturges, 1994; Seeger, Sellnow & Ulmer, 2003; Zhang, Jia & Gu, 2012). Especially when most people are preoccupied with ensuring their own safety, and therefore cannot engage in the decision-making process, they look to the ones who can to tell them what action to take (Boehm, Enoshm & Michal, 2010).

Crises are optimal situations for charismatic leadership to emerge. Not only do followers tend to gravitate towards charismatic leaders in an ambiguous situation (Shamir & Howell, 1999), they tend to attribute more charisma to leaders as well (Halverson, Murphy & Riggio, 2004). This, in turn, makes people even more dependent on leaders, especially if they are already perceived as charismatic. (Bryman, 1993; Halverson, Murphy & Riggio, 2004). There are multiple reasons for this influential position of charisma. In the confusion of a crisis situation, people look for direction and security (Boehm, Enoshm & Michal, 2010; Spradley, 2017). Charismatic leaders tend to offer direction and inspire a sense of security in their behavior (Halverson, Murphy & Riggio, 2004). Secondly, crises can be characterized as a 'weak' situation, meaning that they have goals that cannot easily be measured or specified. Charisma tends to emerge easier in a weak rather than a strong situation, where conditions, rewards and punishments are clearer (Shamir & Howell, 1999). Furthermore, when the tasks to be executed are challenging, complex and require collaboration, which is often the case in a crisis situation, a charismatic leader will emerge sooner, as he or she can inspire resilience and foster collaboration (Shamir & Howell, 1999; Spradley, 2017).

Communication is key in crisis situations. People tend to look for clarity, direction and stability in uncertain times (Boehm, Enoshm & Michal, 2010). Decisive action and direction not only need to be determined, it also needs to be clearly and openly communicated to followers and subordinates (Kneuer & Wallaschek, 2022). Leaders who communicate quickly, openly, clearly and consistently tend to foster collaboration among employees (Spradley, 2017), as well as faith in the organization's stability and direction in the eyes of their subordinates (Coombs, 2007; Olsson, 2014). During the critical phase of the crisis, it is important to communicate clearly about tasks, goals and procedures. By establishing a clear structure and behavioral pattern, employees will feel comforted, and a sense of stability can be established (Sturges, 1994). As soon as the heaviest impact of the crisis starts to fade, it becomes increasingly important to communicate to employees how to deal with the consequences of what they experienced (Sturges, 1994). This will make employees feel seen, cared for and gives off a sense of personal involvement. Not only will this help employees but will also restore the internal reputation of an organization in case this has been damaged (Olsson, 2014).

In summary, crisis management research emphasizes that members of a community experiencing a crisis scenario will experience stress and insecurity, and become more dependent on others. In addition, they will prioritize basic needs necessary for survival and security when they feel threatened in their livelihood, as well as emotional support in dealing with personal problems. Within organizations, this lack of stability pushes employees to look to others they consider leaders for vision, direction and guidance, and desire active leadership. In this, they tend to lean towards charismatic leaders who are capable of instilling feelings of stability, control and direction. Lastly, they require this direction to be communicated in a clear, open and honest way.

2.2.2 Psychology: Human needs through Maslow's hierarchy of needs and Self-Determination Theory.

To explore human and employee needs from a psychological angle, two theoretical concepts from the field of psychology will shortly be touched upon. As stated, the field of crisis communication observes a shift towards primary needs when people experience a crisis, in which they tend to prioritize health, well-being and security above all other needs when they feel threatened in their livelihood. This is in line with the dominant psychological concept of Maslow's pyramid (Kenrick, et. al., 2010).

Maslow's hierarchy of needs is a psychological idea explaining human motivation as a pyramid, in which the lower tiers need to be secured before a person will focus on a higher tier (Kenrick, et. al., 2010) The simplified tiers, in ascending order, are immediate physiological needs (or the means necessary for survival), safety, social belonging, esteem and self-actualization. Due to the popularity of the concept and the many studies it encouraged, many more developed versions of the pyramid have been published, but for the sake of clarity only this simplified version will be referenced. Maslow's pyramid and the general consensus in crisis communication thus seem in agreement that people tend to prioritize survival and security over needs like esteem and self-actualization in times of crisis, if not in general. It should be noted that, even though Maslow's hierarchy is widely used and studied, sufficient scientific evidence lacks to validate the theory (Tay & Diener, 2011; Deckers, 2018). It should thus not be treated as a scientific truth, but as a dominant idea. One of main criticisms of the pyramid is that it assumes that a lower tier has to be fully realized to move on to a higher one, even though there is plenty of evidence to assume that the tiers overlap and do not have to be fully realized before one pursues a 'higher' goal (Kenrick, et. al, 2010; Deckers, 2018). Assumably, this is also the case for employees in public organizations in the Netherlands, even when the organization experiences a crisis. Considering that, in the COVID-19 pandemic, (most) people have not suffered a serious threat to their basic physiological needs, it can be assumed that people will prioritize the lowest threatened tiers of the pyramid. In other words, according to Maslow's pyramid, people will instinctively prioritize security and belonging over esteem and self-actualization, although all can be deemed important to some degree.

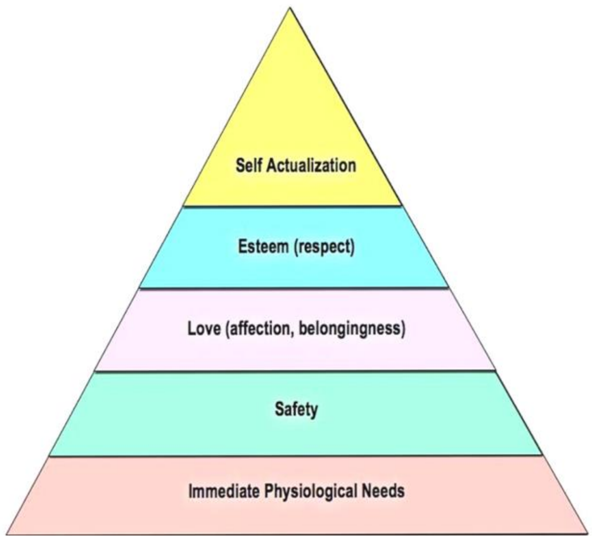

Figure 1: A simplified version of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Kendrick, et. al. (2010).

While Maslow's pyramid is based on primal human needs, it is unsure whether this hierarchy is also applicable to a disturbed but largely well-functioning environment. Given that many public servants would have been relatively okay despite the restrictions of the pandemic, Self-determination theory (SDT) can be used to examine further employee needs in a (relatively) stable environment. Just like Maslow's pyramid, SDT is a psychological concept of human motivation, but with more specific focus on work motivation within an organization (Deci, 2017). First, it distinguishes between controlled and autonomous motivation. Controlled motivation is the idea that an individual undertakes an action because he or she has feels demanded or pressured to do so by others. Autonomous (or intrinsic) motivation is the idea that an individual does something because he or she enjoys or values it for themselves. In addition to distinguishing two types of motivation, SDT also identifies a group of basic, universal psychological requirements which need to be met to optimize work performance and satisfaction, ideally reaching autonomous motivation in an employee. The first of these needs is competence, or wanting to feel confident, capable and effective in relation to what you are doing. The second need is relatedness, the desire to care for and be cared for by others, as well as feeling that you are part of the group you are collaborating with. Third and last is the need for autonomy, or feeling like you are free to make choices and undertake actions independently. Feelings of competence and autonomy are considered particularly important to reach autonomous motivation in somebody, although all three are vital (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Deci, 2017). The theory does not take the effects of employees suffering a crisis situation into account, a condition which might seriously impact these psychological needs, especially when important securities like good health, financial stability or even survival are threatened. Considering these might not be in danger for everyone, it is important to consider that, according to SDT, employees would need feelings of competence, relatedness and autonomy in order to be autonomously motivated.

In summary, according to Maslow's pyramid, people will instinctively prioritize security physiological needs over other pursuits. Given that the COVID-19 barely threatens basic physiological needs, it is expected that people prioritize higher tiers on the pyramid, like security and belonging, making them seek emotional support as well. SDT adds to this that, in order to feel motivated to do work, employees require feeling competent, related to others and autonomous. As a result, people will feel autonomously motivated to contribute.

2.3 Conceptualizing and operationalizing three dominant leadership styles

Now that people's - and more specifically, employee - needs in times of organizational crisis have been mapped, the three chosen leadership styles will be conceptualized and operationalized, and hypotheses will be presented. This chapter will focus on laissez-faire leadership, transactional leadership and transformational leadership respectively, and actively refer to the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) to dissect these styles and introduce the elements to be tested (Avolio & Bass, 2004). Choosing transformational and transactional leadership as the focus of this thesis is based on the fact that this distinction is one of the fundamental differentiations within leadership studies (Burns, 1978). As a result, the two styles are studied thoroughly and are a good starting point for filling this gap in research on public leadership. After closer inspection of the two leadership styles, as well as the MLQ, the core distinction between active and passive leadership proved important to consider as well (Bass, Avolio & Jung, 1999; Boehm, Enoshm & Michal, 2010). To incorporate this divergence, laissez-faire leadership was included as well.

2.3.1 Laissez-Faire Leadership

Laissez-faire leadership is fundamentally characterized by the physical presence of a leader, but absence of actual leadership, and is therefore often referred to as 'non-leadership' (Lewin, Lippitt & White, 1939). In laissez-faire leadership, a supervisor enables followers to make and act on most decisions on their own unless help is requested (Seeger, Sellnow & Ulmer, 2003; Abasilim, Gberevbie & Osibanjo, 2019), as well as have them figure out a work process that is most suitable to them (Lewin, Lippitt & White, 1939; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2022). The coordinating figure in a team does not actively engage in the decision-making process of his followers, nor is he or she looking for mistakes or inconsistencies unless brought to the attention by others, or might even opt to actively avoid complicated situations in order for followers to figure out a solution by themselves (Abasilim, Gberevbie & Osibanjo, 2019). Instead, the leader emphasizes employee authority and trusts them to come up with their own solutions (Seeger, Sellnow & Ulmer, 2003; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2022). This is in contrast with transformational or transactional leadership, which are both dispositions where the leader actively engages with followers and provides them with directions and guidance (Bass, Avolio & Jung, 1999). An example of laissez-faire leadership within the COVID-19 context would be that, when people started working from home, a leader made no effort to structure online work-processes, but let followers find out what worked best for them on their own, only stepping in when followers requested so. Within the MLQ, laissez-faire leadership is conceptualized in statements like 'the person I am rating avoids getting involved when important issues arise' (Avolio & Bass, 2004). To simplify and generalize the concept of laissez-faire leadership while ensuring a neutral disposition towards the style, it was defined as 'having a passive disposition, giving followers a lot of personal authority and refraining from actual involvement' in the interviews.

This leadership style has several – mostly hypothetical – benefits. Laissez-faire leadership arguably fosters creativity and innovation due to the freedom followers enjoy in their work, which also increases personal growth (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2022). Furthermore, as it does not require followers to get approval from their supervisors to make decisions, it facilitates quick decision-making (Amanchukwu, Stanley & Ololube, 2015; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2022). This large degree of autonomy can result in high job satisfaction, productivity (Amanchukwu, Stanley & Ololube, 2015) and autonomous motivation (Deci, 2017). It should be noted that these benefits are mostly, if not exclusively, successful among disciplined, knowledgeable and responsible employees (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2022). Also, these benefits are mostly speculative, as the researcher was unable to find empirical evidence to support these claims.

There is, however, empirical evidence that supports the paradigm that laissez-faire leadership is an inefficient, if not bad, leadership style (Backhaus & Vogel, 2021). It is known to be related to low productivity and efficiency (Anbazhagan & Kotur, 2014). The passive disposition of this style could also make inexperienced, unfamiliar or unknowledgeable employees lose work motivation, become disengaged from their work and start feeling unsure about their place in the organization (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2022). Furthermore, laissez-faire leadership is also negatively related to the perception of a leader's effectiveness and general employee satisfaction with their leader, given that an invisible leader can hardly be considered effective or satisfying. (Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Breevaart & Zacher, 2019). Most important for this thesis, however, is that laissez-faire leadership leads to the avoidance of making decisions and hesitation instead of actively responding to a situation demanding leadership (Piccolo, et. al., 2012; Abasilim, Gberevbie & Osibanjo, 2019; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2022). As stated in the previous chapter, a crisis situation generally requires leaders to portray active guidance, a shared vision or policy and decisive action. In other words, they require active leadership. Both transformational and transactional leadership are more active styles of leadership, although through different processes and relationships, and thus seem more suitable for an organizational crisis. These observation leads to the first hypothesis:

> Hypothesis 1 (H1): *Public servants consider the laissez-faire leadership style less desirable in an organizational crisis in comparison to the transactional and transformational leadership styles.*

2.3.2 Transactional Leadership

In contrast to the laissez-faire style, the transactional leadership style is an active form of leadership behavior. The main characteristic of this leadership style is that it is mainly based on relations of exchange, with the purpose of trading things the respective leader and follower value (Burns, 1978). In other words, transactional leadership focuses on the self-interest of both parties, as a leader 'receives' better performance from his employees in exchange for rewards, and vice versa (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2022). This exchange is often economic in nature, but can also be political or psychological, particularly in public organizations (Jacobsen & Andersen, 2015). The clearest example of transactional leadership is the widely used corporate bonus system, meaning that employees can get additional payments in exchange for better performance. In a public setting, where bonus regulations are less common, this relationship could be more psychological, like being named ‘employee of the month’ after finishing a project to the positive judgement of the transactional leader. It is important to note that, according to the classical definition, a transactional relationship is only built on the transaction itself; it does not bind leader and follower to a higher purpose than the bargain, as is the case with transformational leadership (Burns, 1978; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2022).

In addition to being built on structures of exchange, transactional leadership is also often perceived as a leadership style based on control. Transactional leaders seek to build clear and strong structures to aid them in maintaining a stable environment and performance, for example through pay structures, career paths and standardized performance management (Jacobsen & Andersen, 2015; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2022). Furthermore, because transactional leadership emphasizes performance, leaders employing this style often excel at deploying and optimizing a work structure and situation through planning, monitoring goal-setting and solving problems (Boehm, Enoshm & Michal, 2010; Wart, 2013). This ‘initiation of a clear structure’ is also one of the metrics discussed in the interviews of this study to illustrate the importance of this aspect of transactional leadership. In this context, ‘initiation of structure’ means that the leader makes an effort to create a clear structure of guidelines and standardized processes of execution for employees to hold on to, thus enabling them to pick up their work responsibilities quickly and easily, and in a way that can be easily supervised by the leader.

The second aspect discussed with the participants is the idea of ‘a system of clear goals and according rewards and consequences’. This metric merges two important aspects of transactional leadership: contingent rewards and management-by-exception. The idea of contingent reward is that the leader provides clear tasks and goals for their followers to work with and is clear about corresponding rewards or consequences if these respectively are or aren’t met (Bass & Avolio, 2004; Rainey, 2014). Assisting this reasoning is the idea of management-by-exception (Sommer, et. al., 2016). This management principle states that the leader monitors his employees along dictated norms and goals (Rainey, 2014). The leader only focuses on those cases that deviate largely from the established norm, both in case of better or poorer results, and act according to the contingent rewards (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2022)

Transactional leadership is successful in a variety of situations. Traditionally, it is most successful in organizations with a narrow range of context and performance variables, where performance is most important *and* testable, and the environment is as stable as possible (Wart, 2013). As long as the organization is stable, the transactional mentality that good performance will result in better rewards will keep people engaged in their work (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2022). Despite the observation that transactional leadership flourishes in a stable environment, it also has merits in the uncertainty of an organizational crisis. Transactional leadership generally radiates authority, decisiveness and - depending on the degree to which old structures are still applicable - quick decisions can be made (Boehm, Enoshm & Michal, 2010). Through these characteristics, the initiation of structure potentially gives employees someone they can depend on and look to for guidance (Seeger, Sellnow & Ulmer, 2003). This establishment of a new, clear work structure can be considered a fundamental part of the strategy to combat the uncertainty of a crisis situation, and leads to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2a (H2a): *Public servants consider the transactional leadership behavior of initiating structure extra important in times of organizational crisis.*

The estimated importance of a system of contingent rewards is more complicated. Given that transactional leadership is focused on ensuring proper rewards as long as agreed-upon goals are met, it can be argued that it gives employees some feeling of agency over their (financial) security, because they can theoretically improve their situation by performing well themselves. This would satisfy some of the first priority needs on Maslow's pyramid, those being survival and security, and possibly even belonging, given that people might feel supported and appreciated in their efforts through some extra rewards (Kenrick, et. al., 2010). However, in the case of COVID-19 in public organizations, these former two benefits might not be directly applicable. As established, the pandemic did generally not threaten the lower tiers of Maslow's pyramid to a large degree. At first glance, it also seems that extra rewards for good work might make people feel more competent, thus helping to create autonomous motivation (Deci, 2017). However, research on the relationship between extrinsic rewards and intrinsic motivation shows that the former has an undermining effect on the latter (Deci, et. al., 2001; Ma, et. al., 2014). In addition, even though acknowledgement of employee efforts through extra rewards would be appreciated, it seems unlikely that this would be a first priority. This leads to the following hypothesis on transactional leadership:

> Hypothesis 2b (**H2b**): *Public servants do not consider a transactional 'system of goals and according rewards and consequences' extra important in times of organizational crisis.*

2.3.3 Transformational leadership

In contrast to transactional leadership, the transformational leadership style has people engage 'in such a way that leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality' (Burns, 1978, p. 20). Through communication and stimulation, the leader strives to change the beliefs and behaviors of his employees to be more in line with a shared vision and collective outcomes (Bass, 1985; Wart, 2013; Rainey; 2014; Jacobsen & Andersen, 2015). This is a stark contrast compared to self-interest driving transactional leadership. Transformational leaders - sometimes called holistic leaders - not only focus on inspiring a shared vision, but also pay mind to human and personal factors of concern to their followers and have emotional influence over them. (Bass, 1985; Rainey, 2014; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2022). This personal engagement also enables a transactional leader to focus on the professional development of subjects and foster intellectual stimulation (Bass & Avolio, 1999; Rainey, 2014). In further contrast to transactional leadership, the transactional leader embraces the inevitability of organizational change and sees it as an opportunity for improvement (Halverson, Murphy & Riggio, 2004; Bommer, Rubin & Baldwin, 2004; Wart, 2013). Transformational leadership also positively influences leader satisfaction, effectivity perceptions and work motivation among followers (Janis, 2004), as well as job satisfaction and work quality (Park & Rainey, 2008). Taking all this into consideration, transformational leadership is often cited as 'the best' leadership style for the public sector, as these are strongly linked to society-oriented missions instead of financial gain (Wright, Moynihan & Pandey, 2012).

In addition to being associated with democratic and holistic leadership, transformational leadership is often associated with charisma (Bass, 1985; Shamir & Howell, 1999; Halverson, Murphy & Riggio, 2004). Charismatic leadership emphasizes the part of transformational leadership that governs the articulation of a shared vision (Bass, 1985), and attempts to have employees internalize values and goals of a leader, develop strong moral and personal commitment to these goals and create willingness to choose the collective over individual interests (Shamir & Howell, 1999). Charisma is not a behavior that is deployed, but something that is perceived by others (Bryman, 1993). It is hard to define what attributes make someone charismatic, but one of the most important aspects is portraying inspirational, exemplary behavior within the articulated vision (Zhang, Jia & Gu, 2012). In the interviews, 'charismatic, exemplary behavior' is also used as one of the metrics to measure transformational leadership. This metric not only governs idealized behavior, but also inspirational motivation and idealized attributes, two other behaviors often attributed to transformational leadership (Bass & Avolio, 1999; Wright, Moynihan & Pandey, 2012; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2022). Based on research on crisis situations and charismatic leadership, it appears charismatic leadership emerges more often in crisis situations for two reasons. First, because people are stressed and frustrated, they tend to cling to someone who inspires them and seems to give them some direction (Halverson, Murphy & Riggio, 2004). Secondly, because of the sudden uncertainty and potential change, a crisis creates a lot of directional ambiguity. This hands charismatic leaders the opportunity to display their personal vision (Shamir & Howell, 1999). Self-sacrificial behavior complements this exemplary disposition, further improving the positive perception among followers (Zhang, Jia & Gu, 2012). Furthermore, leaders who are more prototypical (or exemplary!) in relation to the rest of the group are perceived as more trustworthy and seen as more effective (Giessner & Knippenberg, 2008). Given that people are more amenable to charismatic leaders in times of crisis, the following hypothesis can be formulated:

Hypothesis 3a (**H3a**): *Public servants consider charismatic or exemplary behavior extra important in times of organizational crisis.*

The second metric used to discuss transformational leadership is ‘clear communication and regular updating’. Although this is not a traditional part of transformational leadership, let alone exclusive to it, Boehm, Enoshm & Michal (2010) make a convincing case of its importance for and belonging to this leadership style, particularly in the context of a crisis, just like they did for ‘initiating structure’ in transactional leadership. The main reason for this is that emphasized communication often stretches beyond initiating structure and facilitating relations of exchange; it goes the extra mile to provide extra clarity on a myriad of potentially relevant topics like external affairs or shared ideals, particularly in a crisis. Obviously, clear communication is important in organizations regardless of the ambiguity of their context, but even more so if the organization suffers a crisis. Clear communication and regular updates on the process are vital in the ambiguous and unclear environment created by a crisis trigger event, since this will strengthen or even create feelings of involvement, personal attention and direction among followers (Boehm, Enoshm & Michal, 2010), as well as foster solidarity and collaboration between individuals and organizations, things that are demanded in a crisis by both leaders and followers (Kneuer & Wallaschek, 2022). This has to happen in an open and honest manner, particularly when discussing dilemmas, risks and efforts taken by society and the organization (Ansell, Sorensen & Torving, 2020) Furthermore, intensive leader-member exchange is important to give employees the feeling the leader is taking responsibility and fulfills their duties, while also justifying the taken measures as reasonable and appropriate (Kneuer & Wallaschek, 2022). In summary: clear communication is vital to create a feeling of trust in a leader. Subsequently satisfying important crisis needs, it can be hypothesized that:

Hypothesis 3b (H3b): *Public servants consider the transformational behavior of clear communication and regular updating extra important in times of organizational crisis.*

The last metric used is that of ‘individual consideration’, meaning attention to an individual’s personal situation, while also governing the typical transformational behavior of intellectual stimulation through personal development (Bass, 1985; Boehm, Enoshm & Michal, 2010). As said before, people require emotional support and feelings of attention and inclusion during the hardships of a crisis. Through individual consideration, this need is satisfied (Zhang, Jia & Gu, 2012; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2022). It is also in line with Maslow’s pyramid, with feelings of belonging being the third layer. Individualized consideration also fosters relatedness, both to the leader and the rest of the team, thus increasing motivation according to the SDT-framework (Deci, 2017). Transformational leadership also builds resilience among followers as long as relationships are good between the leader and the followers, a beneficial process during crisis situations (Sommer, et. al., 2016). These benefits make individual consideration very important for emotional control. Intellectual stimulation, however, might not be a priority among employees, given that self-actualization is the highest tier on Maslow’s pyramid. Given that the lower tiers are hardly met to a satisfying degree, personal development will theoretically not be a first priority. Prior research on either community or employee crisis needs also makes no mention of personal development in crisis situations, suggesting that it is either not a priority in a crisis scenario or it has not been involved in any major studies on the subject. Regardless of the role of intellectual stimulation, it is expected that emotional support is sufficiently important that the participants will still consider the idea of individualized consideration extra important. The resulting hypotheses are the following:

Hypothesis 3c (H3c): *Public servants consider the transformational behavior of individualized consideration extra important in times of organizational crisis.*

Hypothesis 3d (H3d): *Public servants consider personal development, an aspect of individualized consideration, less important than the aspect of emotional support.*

2.3.4 Combining transactional and transformational leadership

In these chapters, it has become clear that transactional and transformational leadership both satisfy different needs in crisis situations. Transactional leadership behavior excels at providing quick and decisive action and guidance, and a clear sense of structure amongst employees. Furthermore, it can provide a clear way to financial security though clear work structures and processes, a big potential concern. Transformational leadership also helps articulate vision and direction, and excels in integrating this vision among the interests of employees through its charismatic elements. What’s more, it provides clear and frequent communication and emotional support. In conclusion, both leadership styles satisfy some crisis needs, but not all. Considering these points, it is reasonable to agree with the scientific paradigm that in every organization, a combination of transactional and transformational elements is necessary for effective leadership, not only in crises but during stable times as well (Rainey & Steinbauer, 1999; Seeger, Sellnow & Ulmer, 2003; Park & Rainey, 2008; Boehm, Enoshm & Michal, 2010; Zhang, Jia & Gu, 2012; Wart, 2013; Rainey, 2014; Jacobsen & Andersen, 2015; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2022). This combination would not only satisfy all needs and preferences identified through crisis communication, but also be able to Maslow’s lower hierarchical tiers of security and belonging. The SDT-need for relatedness would also be satisfied through individualized consideration (Deci, 2017). This leads the researcher to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 4 (H4): *Public servants consider transactional and transformational leadership elements extra important during a crisis situation to roughly the same degree.*

3. Research Design

To test the hypotheses to posed research question - namely what leadership behaviors public servants need in times of organizational crisis - this thesis uses an exploratory qualitative case-study model, although using two cases. This specific research style has been chosen because little to no research has been done on public servant needs under these circumstances, and exploratory research enables the researcher to identify many potential factors at play in this relationship to be researched in another time. The cases in question are the Dutch municipalities of The Hague and Gouda during the first month of the COVID-19 pandemic, mainly chosen for their (relatively) direct availability to the researcher, and data collection was done by means of structured interviews. The qualitative yet structured nature of this way of data collection enables the researcher to gather complicated and detailed information on the complex, multi-faceted subject the respondents were asked about. The structured nature ensured the ability to keep control of the conversation and ask specific, important questions about the main research subject. Afterwards, the key information gathered in the interview was coded to a minimal degree to get a clear overview of the data on the hypotheses and, by extension, the research question. All these matters are discussed in more detail in the following chapter, as well as the matters of reliability, validity and limitations to this research design.

3.1 Case justification

To analyze the priorities of public servants in times of organizational crisis, two important questions had to be answered in terms of case selection: which crisis and which public organization? In choosing suitable cases, both of these have differing ideal characteristics. For the crisis, an 'extreme case' is desirable for this study, since that would increase the visibility of the processes at play in such a situation in comparison to a typical case among the population of crises. This would benefit exploratory research, because the easier varying processes can be identified, the more recommendations for further research can be done at the end of this thesis. The flipside to an extreme case would be that the observed processes would potentially not be generalizable to other crises, as the pandemic can be considered an 'exaggerated' case. For the organization on the other hand, a 'typical case' is desirable. This would presumably make the observations more generalizable for other public organizations if they were also observed in the context of the pandemic. The visible processes not being specific for one type of public organization only would give future researchers a more stable foundation to base further research upon (Seawright & Gerring, 2008).

The crisis case best suited for this study is the COVID-19 pandemic, which is chosen for a few reasons. Firstly, the pandemic can be considered an 'extreme case' (Seawright & Gerring, 2008), meaning that it is an unusually strong example among a larger population. In light of the pandemic, the crisis was extreme in terms of scale, effects on the work situation and personal lives of employees, in comparison to other organizational crises. The extremity of this case makes it especially useful for exploratory research, since it theoretically maximizes the observable effects of a crisis on leadership preferences (Seawright & Gerring, 2008). Lastly, because of the large scale of the crisis, the researcher argued that most - if not all - aspects of society were influenced by the pandemic. As a result, every individual person and organization has undeniably felt the effects of the events, regardless of further characteristics of the organization or participant. This not only broadened the number of public organizations to choose from, but also made the case personally relatable to any potential participants.

It should be noted that, regardless of which crisis would have been picked, conducting research on a public organization in the midst of an organizational crisis is quite hard. An organization in crisis of often preoccupied with tackling the crisis at hand, causing their contribution to a study like this to be no priority (Olsson, 2014). In addition, the number of large-scale recent crises to choose from is small, necessitating the consideration of picking 'passed' crisis, although this would require the participants to answer question retrospectively. Although the pandemic can be considered 'solved' and its outbreak was almost three years ago, it was recent and impactful enough to believe that participants would be able to accurately recollect their situation and feelings of the time.

The study participants chosen for the case of the COVID-19 pandemic were Dutch municipal employees. Municipalities were chosen for their relatively high estimated generalizability in comparison to more specialized public organizations like schools, hospitals or the GGD (municipal health service). This is the case because municipalities focus on many different societal aspects at the same time instead of one or few part(s) of society as the other organizations do. A municipality could thus be considered a ‘typical case’, as it is most suitable as a representative for the larger population of public organizations (Seawright & Gerring, 2008). This might make the observations more generalizable for other public organizations, although they should be observed in the same crisis situation. The last reason for studying municipalities was because several were easily accessible for the researcher through his personal network, giving him an easier time recruiting participants. To further specify the case selection, employees of the Municipalities of The Hague and Gouda were selected. The fact that these municipalities became the two objects to be studied was a direct result of the limitations of the recruitment process of the participants.

The municipality of The Hague is the third largest Dutch municipality with over 550.000 inhabitants, with The Hague also being the third largest city in the Netherlands. It’s yearly income per household of almost 29.000 euros in 2021 was average compared to the rest of the country, although the financial differences in the city are substantial. Although the population is relatively evenly split between high, medium and low levels of education, most people are highly educated (36.5%). An important characteristic of the municipality is that, although it’s not the Dutch capital, it is its political center, with the Dutch parliament and the king having their seat in the city of The Hague. This also makes the government the most important employer in the municipality, with over 25% of people working at a public organization. Furthermore, the municipality houses the International Peace Court and a branch of the University of Leiden. All these organizations make The Hague one of – if not the – most important municipalities in the Netherlands when it comes to public activities on a local, national and international level.

Gouda has a population of just over 75.000 people and despite its position in the middle of the ‘green heart’, a thinly populated natural area in the center of the country, it is a heavily urbanized municipality. Within the green heart, it plays a central role, as Gouda is the largest city in the area. With

29.100 euros, the average income in Gouda is just above average in the Netherlands, and most people have enjoyed middle-tier education. Notably, the biggest employer in the region is the healthcare sector (26%), with the city's hospital being the most important one in the general area.

3.2 Participants

The respondents of this study had to meet two important requirements to be eligible for participation. First, the respondent had to be working at the municipality during the COVID-19 pandemic in any capacity, preferably in the first two months of the crisis. Second, the respondent had to have an informed view on follower needs during the first two months of the pandemic. Initially, this meant that people who worked in another municipality in the beginning of the pandemic, as well as those who were promoted into a leading role were not fit for participation. Due to the risk of finding too few participants or losing current ones, it was later determined that respondents who were working at another municipality for a part of the pandemic, but during the crisis period moved to their current municipality, as well as people who worked in a leading role but still answered to a supervisor, were eligible for participation as well. Given the notion that participants had to have certain specific qualities to be eligible for recruitment, the sampling process is purposive in nature (Pearson, 2014).

Although built on a purposive foundation, participants were primarily recruited through convenience sampling. This refers to a process in which the researcher prioritizes means that are easily available to reach possible participants (Pearson, 2014). In this case, this means that direct contacts of the researcher holding positions at varying municipalities were asked to infer whether their direct colleagues were interested in participation. They were also asked to spread information on the project and contact details around online environments and public places in their office. These messages can be found in Appendix A. Using these methods, possible participants were reached in the Dutch municipalities of Leiden, The Hague, Gouda, Haarlemmermeer and Koggenland. To increase representability for a given municipality, a minimum of three participants per organization was needed to make it useful for participation, causing Leiden, Haarlemmermeer and Koggenland to be dropped.

Overall, ten participants were deemed necessary to create enough reliability. To further increase the number of respondents to the desired ten, snowball sampling was successfully employed further down the line. Snowball sampling means that current participants were asked to further call on other colleagues to participate in the research (Pearson, 2014). The most important information on the participants is visible in the table below. Further details are in Appendix B.

3.3 Instrument

The instruments used to question the participants and gather data were semi-structured interviews. This enabled the researcher to keep some freedom to ask side questions and gather additional information on the complex mechanisms at work, while adhering to a set list and structure of questions and ensuring that the desired data was gathered (Bryman, 2015). The researcher frequently employed (paraphrased) probes, questions posed to clarify, complete or supplement earlier answers, or to get to the core to a relevant answer (Pearson, 2014).

The list and order of interview questions was of the researcher's own fabrication, but largely based on the basic Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (Bass & Avolio, 2004) and the variation used to analyze community leadership needs during the Lebanese War in 2010 (Boehm, Enoshm & Michal, 2010). This combination allowed the researcher to strike a balance between a widely used system to test leadership styles and the need to adapt the questionnaire to better fit a crisis scenario. The survey that was eventually used has not been validated. Although creating a specialized questionnaire reduces the validity of the research, measures were taken to minimize this reduction. The questions and general setup of the interview have all been firmly based on lists used in earlier studies (Bass & Avolio, 2004; Boehm, Enoshm & Michal, 2010; Brinkman & Kvale, 2018) and have been discussed with a supervisor prior to the first interview. By keeping the interview questions somewhat open for interpretation, the researcher allowed participants to illustrate the complex situation they were in, benefitting this explorative study. If the researcher had the idea that the interviewee did not understand the question or the response did not answer it completely, probing questions were used to guide the interviewee to the essence of the subject of obtain additional information.

The questionnaire was divided into two main parts. The first consisted of several questions on the work environment before and during the pandemic, as well as on actions their supervisors had undertaken to combat the challenges of the time (if there were any). This not only provides the researcher with potentially useful background information, but also allows the participant to recollect their memories of this period. This remembrance of the situation and its challenges, needs and actions was necessary because in the second part of the interview, participants were asked to retrospectively reflect on leadership needs during that time. This second part consisted of the metrics mentioned in the literature review. To summarize, the six metrics and their corresponding leadership styles are:

1. Charismatic and exemplary behavior (Transformational)
2. Clear communication and frequent updating (Transformational)
3. Individualized consideration (Transformational)
4. A system of clear goals and corresponding rewards or punishments (Transactional)
5. Initiation of structure (Transactional)
6. A passive disposition (Laissez-Faire)

In addition to being asked to respond to the question how important these behaviors were to them during the crisis period, participants were also explicitly asked to assess whether these needs were different from times of stability, both before and after the crisis. This would give a clearer image of potentially changed needs. As a final question, the six metrics were repeated by the interviewer, after which the interviewee was asked to highlight which behaviors jumped out as more or less desirable to them when comparing a crisis situation and a stable situation. The full interview guide can be found in Appendix C, including the optional explanations of the metrics.

3.4 Procedure

A total of ten interviews were conducted, with four participants from the municipality of Gouda and six from The Hague. Two interviews were conducted in the city hall of Gouda, the other through video or phone call. All interviews were held in in April 2023 and recorded for later transcription and quotation. For the sake of privacy, all interviewees were anonymized. Prior to starting the two main parts of the interview, the study was explained shortly, the informed consent form was signed, permission was to record the interview was obtained and the interviewees were asked to introduce themselves. Although it was initially planned to conduct the interviews in English, every participant opted to do the interview in Dutch, mostly because they felt they could be more open and honest that way. The interviews were not translated, except for relevant quotes. Participants did not know the specific questions beforehand but were informed of the general nature and goal of the interview, as specified in the informed consent form (Appendix D). The interviewer did his best to adhere to general scientific interviewing advice (Harvey, 2011; Pearson, 2014; Toshkov, 2016; Brinkman & Kvale, 2018) while making an effort to build a comfortable situation for the participant to tell their personal opinions.

The answers to the last question, in which the participants were asked to highlight behaviors they considered extra important, were coded for some extra overview of the gathered data. For every time a metric was named more desirable during a crisis, one point was attributed, and every time a metric was named less desirable, one was subtracted. The metrics with the highest scores can be labeled most important during a crisis period. After all the points were distributed, the total number of points was divided by the number of metrics within their respective leadership style category. By comparing these final numbers, a general statement could be made about what leadership style is most desirable overall, according to this study. The coding forms used can be found in the coding form in Appendix E.

Two important aspects of the data gathered in this study are those of the data's limited reliability but high validity. Reliability is the degree to which the instrument used will gather the same or similar results under the same circumstances (Pearson, 2014). In qualitative research, reliability is a hard thing to achieve or optimize, as the gathered data is complex, unstable, personal, and thus, hard to replicate. Furthermore, interviews are hard to consider reliable because they are heavily influenced by the interactive process between the interviewer and participant. This potentially creates large differences per interviewer, regardless of the questions staying the same. In qualitative research, reliability stems from the acknowledgement that the data gathered is so complex that multiple sources and measurement methods are necessary to capture it. For example, body language or tone of voice is data complementary to the answer to the question, but the data set is far too small to make it sufficiently reliable. Then again, reliability is hardly the primary goal in this study, or in qualitative research for that matter (Pearson, 2014). Qualitative validity is the degree to which the ideas presented in this study are in accordance with the real world (Pearson, 2014). Where reliability is something that is hard to produce in qualitative studies, validity is almost inherent to this type of research. By allowing participants to give detailed, complex and personal accounts of their work situation, we directly ask the participant to describe their own truth. This view will be unreliable, since it is different for every employee and can thus not be generalized, but every individual account can be considered valid (Pearson, 2014).

3.5 Limitations of the research design

Although the case presented and methods chosen are useful for conducting exploratory research on this subject, it is not without its limitations and flaws. Some are inherent to this type of research method, like interviews being hard to replicate or small-scale studies risking the influence of randomness bias and overall being hard to generalize to a larger population (Pearson, 2014; Toshkov, 2016). Interviewer bias, the idea that the participant changes answers based on the perception of their interviewer, is inevitable as well. However, some factors are more specific to this study.

Selection bias, or the idea that the criteria used to select participants are inherently biased to certain opinions, is hard to avoid when employing purposive sampling, and forms the biggest limitation in this study. For example, crises and their characteristics can vary a lot. The COVID-19 pandemic was a widespread and influential case, but people would probably react differently if a different illness had spread, or in case of an earthquake instead of a pandemic. The same goes for the fact that one of the characteristics was that people had to stay at home, probably the most influential consequence of this crisis. Had this not been the case, other needs might be identified. In addition, because of the mortality rates and intrusion in their private lives, the pandemic was a very emotional affair for many people. This will, in addition to case selection bias, create an emotional bias among participants, as they remember certain aspects more vividly or even differently because of their emotional impact.

The fact that the participants were all either recruited through direct connections of the researcher, or snowballed through former participants, will further increase the selection bias, as supporters of the project will probably call on colleagues that they are close with, increasing the risk that they will fundamentally agree on certain topics answered in the questionnaire. This might make the answers more homogenous than would be the case in random sampling. Also, since some participants, for example R1 & R4, have in the meantime moved to more leadership-oriented positions, their views on follower needs will probably have changed accordingly.

The case of the municipalities is not without bias either, both in relation to other municipalities in the Netherlands, as well as to each other. To illustrate the representativeness of both municipalities in comparison to the Netherlands overall, Whooz & Whize ranked all Dutch municipalities in terms of how close they were to the Dutch average (Whooz & Whize, 2022). The Hague ended up in the 322nd place out of 345, and Gouda on 23rd. Both The Hague and Gouda are heavily urbanized and densely populated in comparison to the rest of the country and are located in the 'Randstad' economic zone, arguably the most important financial and political area of the country. Although both municipalities are around the national average in terms of household income, municipalities that are poorer, thinly populated or more rural in nature might have a different outlook on leadership preferences. Furthermore, both municipalities are relatively highly educated in comparison to the national average (Whooz & Whize, 2022). In addition, the municipalities both rely heavily on their most important cities, The Hague and Gouda. Municipalities that are more decentralized, like Koggenland, where multiple smaller towns are governed instead of one major city, might consider other aspects of leadership important. For example, it could be easier to create municipal solidarity in one city like The Hague, where citizens might have a stronger sense of community and identity connected to their city, compared to the fragmented system of towns in Koggenland. This could create different needs in terms of transformational leadership.

In comparison to each other, other potentially important differences appear. First off, The Hague is a lot more populous than Gouda, making the municipality directly responsible for more citizens. The Hague has a significantly larger number of employees and governmental function compared to Gouda, since it is tied to various (inter)national public organizations in the same city. It can be expected that The Hague is therefore more experienced, professionalized and is better facilitated. This could create a bias towards a more autonomous work process, or little need for emotional support due to superior digital facilities. It stands out that Gouda has close ties to the healthcare sector, with that being such a large factor in the employee make-up of the region. With the healthcare sector being affected very differently from the rest of society, it can be assumed that municipal employees in Gouda who work with them will also have to deal with different circumstances. A clear vision or structure might thus be extra important. Lastly, The Hague inevitably has close ties to the national government of the Netherlands, where the national policies are shaped. This might make the political views of participants more influential. This could result in people considering an outspoken vision leaning towards a certain policy more undesirable in The Hague compared to Gouda.

In addition, the interview questions also know some specific limitations. First of all, the chosen questions are broad and leave room for interpretation. By using a probing technique, the researcher could tackle this to a large degree, but this increases the risk of asking guiding questions. Furthermore, the participants were asked to answer key questions retrospectively. Although the questions were introduced by a part focused on refreshing their memory, the interviewees are bound to have unconsciously misremembered some parts. Recency bias might influence the last part of the questionnaire too, as the order of questions remained the same throughout the interviews. This meant that ‘passive disposition’ was always the last subject to be discussed before asking which metrics stood out. According to recency bias, the last discussed subject will be top-of-mind, and thus has a higher chance of being mentioned in this answer. By repeating all six metrics before posing this final question, this bias will have been fended off to some degree, but probably not completely. Translating quotes from Dutch to English creates room for mistakes, but freedom of speech created by allowing the participants to partake in Dutch is considered more beneficial to this study than it would have been to force everyone into an English-spoken conversation. Lastly, the custom questionnaire was not validated, possibly rendering it unsuitable. However, since it was based on other – validated – questionnaires and because of the explorative nature of this study, this does not completely discredit the data.

4. Results and Discussion

After analyzing and coding the interviews, it became clear that the interviewees had – in general – a clear need for transformational leadership behaviors in times of crisis, which had an importance score of 5.7. Transactional and laissez-faire leadership were scored a lot lower but deemed equally important, with an importance score of 2 points. Clear preferences for certain behaviors were visible as well, with individual consideration noted as extra important by seven out of ten participants, clear communication by five and the initiation of structure by five people as well (although one participant also noted that as undesirable, making the total score 4 points). The complete coding form, both divided into individual participant preferences, as well as total scores per metric and leadership style, can be found in Appendix E. In this chapter, support for individual hypotheses – or lack thereof - will be discussed based on the found data.

4.1 Laissez-faire leadership

The main hypothesis (H1) concerning laissez-faire leadership was that it would be less desirable in times of crisis compared to transformational and transactional leadership. **Hypothesis 1 is partially supported**. On the one hand, transformational leadership is indeed mentioned considerably more often than laissez-faire leadership. This would suggest that people prefer an active leader who expresses a clear vision and is engaged with his followers over someone who has people go their own way and make their own choices (R2, R3, R4).

> *As it dragged on, I noticed I needed something to look out for.. improvement. And without something to aim for, I felt like the walls were closing in on me. (R2).*

> *In the beginning, my supervisor was very active regarding processes and guidelines, particularly because nobody knew left from right… that* [the guidelines] *was very clear, and I think that was absolutely necessary at that point. (R3).*

Lean back and see what happens? No, there always needs to be interaction between you and your people. (R4).

On the other hand, laissez-faire leadership had the exact same average score as transactional leadership, meaning that they were valued roughly equally. Three participants mentioned that they desired a passive disposition more in times of uncertainty (R5, R7, R8).

I think it's important that people – especially during a crisis – take responsibility, and that other can count on them doing so. If you see something going wrong, you can signal to your superior, but that should not be done if there is no good reason to do so. (R8)

There was no need to provide a single work structure, I preferred to find my own way. (R5)

Regardless of the situation, I despise constant direction from a superior and having to explain and justify your progress every week. (R10)

Although freedom in their work was preferred over structure, respondents illustrated how 'a passive disposition' is ideally not black or white. A leader can be passive in the directive aspects of leadership, but active in more people-oriented behaviors.

I think individualized attention, as well as communication concerning updates are very important… there was no need to provide a single work structure.. (R5)

Another option is to be very active in providing clarity and structure, but enable employees to move freely and creatively within these set boundaries. This process can also be time-bound, where a leader first presents and monitors a work structure, and once that is established, he or she can slowly release that pressure.

I think it was very good that a clear vision was chosen for everyone to hold on to when everything was uncertain.. But the challenge is to release that vision in time, which was done well in this case. (R3)

Freedom is paramount for me, but clarity is very important too. That brings me back to the initiation of structure. I want a clear framework, but the ability to work freely within that structure. (R7)

There is a lot of thinking power all throughout the organization, high and low. The garbage men know perfectly well how to do their job best. You should give them the opportunity to come to solutions themselves… They [supervisors] *should be active in illustrating broad working lines, but passive in how to exactly execute those activities. (R9)*

In summary, although very few named it a priority, most participants desired autonomy to a varying degree in their work environment, ensuring that H1 is not completely supported. The people favoring this passive disposition were relatively young (R5, R7, R10), whereas people naming a passive disposition undesirable were generally older and more experienced (R2, R3, R4). It can be assumed that the younger participants, particularly in the age range 20-30, are more used to working in a hybrid manner, making the transition to a digital work environment happening in the first month of the pandemic easier for them compared to their older colleagues, who often have working experience from before computers were an integral part of their work. In line with this, it can be assumed that younger employees, who grew up in the digital age, are generally more tech-savvy than their colleagues, and do not want to be told how to work digitally or to constantly check in to report on their progress.

Another possible reason for this preference for leader passivity could be the nature of the position. Two out of three participants in favor of passivity worked directly with the general municipal board, on the policy-making side. They characterize their work prior to the pandemic as already quite individualized, and this remained the same when it broke out. Although they expressed a preference for this style, that preference did not increase nor decrease under the influence of the pandemic. It should be noted, however, that this could also be a matter of selection bias, as participants working with the board in Gouda (R4) reported opposite preferences compared to those in The Hague (R7, R8). Participants working on the executive side of the municipality generally considered an active leader more of a priority. In describing their work situation, these participants focused more on working with others, like team members, citizens or their supervisor, which could imply that they desire more active participation of others. It can be argued that the 'higher tiers' in the municipality are more in line with the factors that make laissez-faire leadership successful, as identified in the literature review (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2022).

Lastly, the presence of a need for laissez-faire leadership is clearly in line with the SDT-framework. This states that autonomy is one of the three key factors in creating autonomous motivation among employees and might also be important in creating work motivation during a crisis situation (Deci & Ryan, 2000). If this is the case, a demand for laissez-faire leadership behaviors and the inherent autonomy an employee enjoys as a result can be a very motivational factor for public servants.

However, although it does not particularly shine through in the scores themselves, it can be argued that there were more people who would consider laissez-faire leadership undesirable, even though only one participant said so when asked about it. Based on both the scores of the active leadership styles, as well as the subtext of the conversations, it is visible that most people prefer a leader who actively engages in the leadership activities. However, due to the final question being biased towards preferable instead of undesirable leadership behaviors, only two participants mentioned any undesirable practices (R2, R5). Had the question been split into two and would 'undesirable behavior' have had more attention, it is hypothesized that laissez-faire leadership would have had a lower score.

Regardless, it is surprising that this study finds support for (elements of) laissez-faire leadership. As said, there is hardly any empirical evidence that supports that laissez-faire leadership is beneficial (Backhaus & Vogel, 2021). Nevertheless, there is an explicit demand for elements of this leadership style amongst employees. Furthermore, this tendency does not seem directly related to the crisis situation, as multiple participants stated that their desire for freedom was the same before, during and after the pandemic. It could be the case that this difference is a result of the general difference between best practices in public leadership from a top-down perspective and the bottom-up perception of leadership needs, in the same vein as the difference between leader-intended and follower-perceived leadership (Jacobsen & Andersen, 2015).

Further research on laissez-faire leadership should be conducted to find out in what specific contexts this style works best. Upon reexamination of the literature on the subject, it became apparent that laissez-faire leadership being discarded as 'ineffective' could also be a mistake of the way it has been researched so far. Leadership effectiveness is usually studied by taking a default situation which is theoretically devoid of leadership, and applying various leadership styles on that situation to see which ones produce the best results compared to the default situation. Considering that applying *any* leadership inherently leads to better results, it also seems logical to say that non-leadership, in turn, does not. In other words, applying laissez-faire – or non-leadership – to the default situation will make very little difference, as there already was no leadership. Following this standardized research design, laissez-faire leadership will *always* turn out ineffective compared to active styles of leadership, as the default situation is barely changed. In other words, the current paradigm on how to test the effectiveness of various leadership styles seems biased towards active styles of leadership. Given that this study shows there actually is support for laissez-faire behaviors in the context of the pandemic, it is encouraged to study laissez-faire leadership and its potential benefits in a context that is actually suitable for the inherent characteristics of this style.

4.2 Transactional Leadership

4.2.1 Initiating structure

The first hypothesis based on existing research on transactional leadership was that the initiation of a clear work structure would be considered extra important in times of crisis (H2a). **Hypothesis H2a is** supported. Five participants mentioned the initiation of a clear structure as one of their most important needs in the beginning of the pandemic. It was stated that a clear work structure helped them to continue their work as continuously as possible, enabling them to better serve their clients and, by extension, the community. This was of particular importance in a situation where a society-wide pandemic makes everybody look to local and national governments for solutions.

> *The guidelines were strict for us, and we had to be strict with our clients. I don't think it was fun, but it was very clear indeed… I think despite everything, we did a very good job, and that is because of the clear guidelines set by the general board. (R3)*

> *We could already execute our entire process digitally, but the problem was that we had to do it at home instead of at the city hall. In terms of 'who will sign this?' and 'can I come to work to print this document?', we found people to be on location to tackle these problems so we could continue in our established structure. (R6)*

> *In a crisis like this, everything is suddenly different. It was crucial to establish and facilitate what happens and how that is done. It is vital for a supervisor to keep the boat afloat. (R9)*

The same result was also mentioned the other way around, in the sense that someone felt the need for a clearer structure, but the municipality made no organization-wide policy on working from home.

> *It* [work processes] *was very ambiguous and everybody had to reinvent the wheel themselves.. You saw that people felt the need for some clear guidelines, but there were no municipality-wide agreements on those things. It was always said that every team had to decide for themselves. (R7)*

One participant, however, explicitly stated not to want a clear structure, but desired flexibility above other leadership behaviors, particularly to cope with external complications caused by the pandemic.

> *It* [work structure] *was nice to know, but also hard. Many colleagues had children or other reasons to work in the evening, which was fine as long as we kept communicating.. We agreed not to make one structure for everybody, but that it was okay to discuss what worked at what time. We needed that flexibility to combine work with the tough situation at home. (R5)*

As was hypothesized in the literature review, participants expressed a demand for the initiation of a clear work structure to combat the uncertainty that comes with an organizational crisis like this. By providing clear and practical work processes, employees will know what to do and expect, and can continue their efforts as quickly and efficiently possible. Building on this reason, this study finds that people think it is important to have a clear structure as quickly as possible, so that they can help citizens, clients and society as soon as possible. This hints at a possible relationship between transactional leadership and Public Service Motivation (PSM), even though that is something that is more often related to transformational leadership (Park & Rainey, 2008). Public service motivation is "*an individual's predisposition to respond to motives grounded primarily or uniquely in public institutions and organizations"* (Park & Rainey, 2008, 115). Considering that most public servants are inherently driven by PSM to some degree, it could be that this intrinsic motivation fuels a desire for quick restoration of their work pattern in times of crisis, so they can go back to helping the community. This possible – and theoretical - relationship, should be studied deeper in another research project.

While analyzing the positive responses on the 'initiating structure'-metric, it stood out that one participant mentioned desirable behaviors that did not exactly fit in the categories mentioned in the interview, but were important nonetheless. He mentioned that he wanted his manager to take on more of a facilitative role in the beginning, and a monitoring one once that was done.

> *So that* [the role of the leader] *is of course mainly about facilitating people… the basic requirements* [essentials for hybrid working] *necessary for people to do their job. From there, you* [the leader] *should follow and see where it goes and whether key goals are achieved. (R9)*

Although this sounds like it fits in with 'initiating structure', it does not completely. Where the structure mentioned in this interview mainly has to do with standardized work processes and setting goals, the behaviors described by the participants have more to do with facilitating the basic requirements for their work in this changed environment, falling somewhere between individualized consideration and initiating work structure. The same goes for the aforementioned behavior of monitoring key achievements. This borders on laissez-faire leadership, initiating work structure, communication and goal setting, and thus does not fit neatly in the metrics formulated beforehand.

This goes to show just how complex leadership actually is, not only top-down but also bottom-up. Therefore, it is suggested to conduct more research on leadership in crisis situations through the lens of different leadership frameworks. To give an example, the 'effective leadership behavior taxonomy' by Gary Yukl (2012), although not as extensively researched, provides an interesting framework consisting of more concrete leadership behaviors than this study uses, which could help capturing more of the leadership behaviors that fit into multiple 'categories'.

4.2.2 A system of goals and according rewards and punishments

The second hypothesis based on transactional leadership literature was that the participants would not consider a system of goals and according rewards extra important in times of crisis (H2b). **Hypothesis H2b was supported.** None of the participants considered this extra important in times of crisis. Two important reasons emerged from examining the data. In the ambiguity of those first two months of the pandemic, many things were ambiguous, resulting in things not going according to plan or not accomplishing certain goals. Participants mentioned a lot of understanding for this situation and highlighted solidarity between employees, implying that a reward system was not important at the time.

Of course, you have to escalate when things go wrong, and we all have to act quickly.. but when something does not work out, you [the team] *find a way to make sure it does work out as quickly as possible. In the end, we're all on the same boat, and we all try our hardest. If it does not work today, we will try to make it work tomorrow. (R2)*

Secondly, some mentioned that their public organization has no system of rewards or punishments at all, expressing neither a need for nor resistance against the idea of such a concept. This says little about the opinion people would have of this leadership behavior if it were in place but explains why this metric has such a low score.

Mostly, after signing a permanent contract, there are no more consequences, nor any bonuses if you do a good job. (R7)

This statement also implies that the participants broadly saw this system of contingent rewards mainly as a financial one, even after explaining that it could also consist of psychological or political rewards. This remark made little difference for the views on this behavior. Regardless, the psychological effects of such a system were visible, even if the reward was non-financial. This mainly took the shape of acknowledgement of employee effort to make them feel valued and was often appreciated a lot by followers.

People seemed to feel like they had no sight on what others were or were not doing, which consequently meant they felt like they were working harder than others.. I had the feeling some wanted more recognition for their work, because they did more than others.. Through detachees from different mother-organizations, the disbalance between them became apparent. Some received packages full of chocolate every month, whereas others got two bags of tea and a postcard. That was very eye opening. (R1)

Yeah, we got a little present every once in a while, a piece of acknowledgement… That was nice and created a sense of solidarity. After all, we were all together in this mess. (R5)

The two lesser arguments in favor of this system, those being employee agency over their financial situation and fostering feelings of competence, were not found in the data, mainly because no such system formally exists in either of the organizations. Regardless, not only do monetary rewards often not have the desired effect in a stable organization, alternatives to money have an even harder time to reach the intended outcomes of such a system (Spano & Monfardini, 2018).

Despite the dismissal of H2b, the argument that the acknowledgment for a job well done does provide emotional support means that the system is not without merit. The positive stimulation provided by contingent rewards might actually be more beneficial in times of crisis compared to stability. After all, multiple participants mentioned that this acknowledgement of good work helped build solidarity among employees, which is especially valuable in times of crisis. (R2, R5).

4.3 Transformational Leadership

4.3.1 Charismatic and exemplary behavior

Concerning transformational leadership, the first hypothesis was that public servants would consider the display of charismatic and exemplary behavior extra important during an organizational crisis (H3a). **Hypothesis H3a is supported.** Four out of ten participants reported exemplary behavior as a priority in their supervisor's demeanor. Exemplary behavior was mainly considered important because it enabled people with a direct leader to copy them, which provided clarity and gave the sense that the chosen direction was the right one.

Copying behavior was very visible in the beginning. If your supervisor is disinterested, you tend to pick that up too. Following that, it is very important to give the right example, and to encourage others to follow that same line. (R3)

Having someone give an example in a situation where nobody knew what to do ensured that we would not have to think about that [figuring out how to keep the work up]. *(R7)*

By building this confidence in the chosen policy, exemplary behavior was also an indirect source of teamwork, trust and emotional support.

Seeing our manager work efficiently and productively from home showed us that it could be done. That built trust among the team members. (R7)

Furthermore, Respondent 4, arguably the participant with the most high-level leadership experience, also pointed out how taking on an exemplary role as a superior helped spread and realize intended policies among municipal employees.

People look to see whether their superiors adhere to their policies. If we would not do so, we would undermine our own authority. People will always look for the grey area, so you have to be extremely clear, and act on that yourself as well. (R4)

It also cascaded down to lower organizational tiers. If I pay attention to the wellbeing of my direct followers, he will do so with his as well, and that follows through for the entire organization. (R4)

It should be noted, however, that respondent 4 is not a very generalizable participant, since his current position as city manager makes him biased toward certain leadership behaviors in comparison to co-participants without such a leadership position. However, he based these statements on needs he identified himself among his followers and are thus worth mentioning.

Despite the observation that charismatic behavior is in extra demand during an organizational crisis being in line with the hypothesis, problems with its measurements were encountered, nonetheless. In the first two interviews 'charismatic behavior' turned out to be hard to explain to participants, resulting in largely unclear or off-point answers. To combat this, the element of 'exemplary behavior' was added to its basic explanation, and although this resulted in clearer and more usable answers, they often did not include information on the formulating and spreading a shared vision, one of the key elements of transformational leadership. A clearer formulation could have resulted in different results, hypothetically ones where charismatic behavior was even more important. Then again, the transactional 'initiating structure'-metric has a strong face-value overlap with the idea of formulating a 'shared vision', while this also had the exact same score of 4 points.

Another problem with the inclusion of this metric is that, despite the reported importance of exemplary behavior, the example given was not one of a policy of their own design. The policies at play during the pandemic were largely enforced from a national level, not from within the organization itself. Obviously, every organization had its own personal variation, but the most important aspects of the 'vision' remained in accordance with the national course of action. Had this not been the case, and leaders had to embody a vision of their own design, a different outcome might have been observed.

In summary, although the hypothesis was supported, the spirit of the argument would benefit from research in an altered study. First, it would benefit from a clearer definition, or even one that separates the idea of formulating a personal vision from embodying a policy through exemplary behavior. Secondly, the perceived importance of charismatic behavior by leaders should be studied more closely in another crisis case, where the leader formulating the vision is also the one people look to for an example of that vision. Another alternative research setting within the COVID-19 case could be a hospital or the GGD, since those healthcare organizations were subject to different regulations and probably had more agency to make their own policies.

4.3.2 Communication and regular updating

The second hypothesis on transformational leadership stated that public servants would consider clear communication and regular updating extra important during an organizational crisis (H3b). **Hypothesis**

H3b was supported. Out of the ten participants, seven explicitly mentioned this communication to be more important during these times. This means that 'communication' has the highest score out of every metric. Two important themes arise around this communication pattern. First, people report that they need clear communication to know what they can expect from their organization after an important national update, and information on how to maintain their workflow in the changed situation. In this, a need for simple, non-negotiable and unambiguous messages was expressed.

> *We work in a social environment where physical meetings are very important for our job. It was decided that we could not do that anymore, a very unpopular decision. To prevent people from abusing potential grey areas, although for good reasons, clear communication was vital. In normal times, there would still be room for discussion, but if there is a lot of pressure, you have to decide to cut that out, mostly.* (R1)

> *It's very easy for a message to be received differently than what you intended to communicate, so especially in a situation like corona, it is very important to communicate clearly and check whether it was received right. (R2)*

> *Particularly the communication, especially around big updates, because everybody wanted to know what we would and would not be able to do tomorrow. (R5)*

> *We were all very independent and we preferred to do our own thing. As a result, people all wanted different things, where we had to speak with one voice. In that case, it was very important to have a supervisor who translates municipal policy clearly to all employees and to say what will and what won't be. (R6)*

Secondly, emotional themes in the communication from superiors became very important as well. Although this was not necessarily to improve the work situation, people expressed a need to be seen by their superiors and feel supported by them. One participant (R8) reported that knowing that someone is doing their best to create a workable environment for you is beneficial for work motivation and efficiency, but also reassuring on a personal level.

By writing columns, I tried to show my own struggles with working from home, and how that affected me personally. Many people responded to my vulnerability. People recognized the feelings, and it strengthened the understanding between the managers and the employees. (R4)

Because we risked losing people, our supervisor made an effort to keep everybody on board by sending extra emails that would usually be an informal conversation. (R6)

Participants also pointed to the importance of being kept up to date on the current position of the organization, even if there was no further update or if the board did not know what to do themselves. Only knowing that supervisors were *trying* had a reassuring effect, and created a feeling that leaders saw the needs of their followers and were doing all they could to improve the situation. The fact that employees received honest and open information from their supervisors had an impact on itself.

Even if there was no vision, I wanted them to be honest about it and communicate that too. (R7)

In the beginning, nobody knew what to expect. To bring clarity, it is important to actively involve people with what happens, how, why, and to manage expectations of the implications the new situation has. When a new press conference was broadcasted, there was a new update from the board within the hour. This way, we knew that, at the very least, people were working for us, even if there was no more clarity. (R8)

Although most participants limited their answers to one-way communication following a top-down route, respondent 4 pointed in the opposite direction. The participant, who has considerable leadership experience, advocated a system of interaction between leaders and followers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

> *There always needs to be interaction between you and your people. Express trust, be involved and connect people. People are always searching and looking for answers during those times. But you can't inspire people yourself. You inspire them by being inspired yourself. (R4)*

This answer could be a matter of bias created by his year of working from a top-down position, but the success of (semi-) shared leadership or other forms of active follower involvement in these times of crisis is not expansively researched. However, a recent study, also conducted in the context of the pandemic, supports "*collaborative approaches and shared leadership when adapting to major environmental changes."* (Smith, 2022, p76). Taking into consideration that shared leadership worked well during the COVID-pandemic in a university context (Smith, 2022), it might also be useful to study it in the context of a municipality.

4.3.3 Individualized consideration

The last two hypotheses on transformational leadership were both connected to the 'individualized consideration'-metric. The first of these was that the public servants would consider individualized consideration extra important in the face of the pandemic (H3c). **Hypothesis H3c was supported**. Individualized consideration was considered one of the most important leadership activities by six out of the ten participants. Regardless of whether they experienced hardships themselves, all participants recognized that emotional support and consideration helped the organization as a whole to deal with the difficulties of the time.

> *As a municipal employee, you work in the social domain. Inherently, there is something social within you, which is limited when you are forced to work from home. People felt like they had no control over the situation and lost touch. To cope with that, it* [emotional support] *was very important. (R2)*

Well, if you start working from home it is hard to not slip into difficult behavior, loneliness, lack of sleep, because you just kept on working. I think it was very good that the board stimulated caution at the time. After all, it was only our job. (R3)

I had just started, so I thought it was good to remain involved, but had no personal need for extra attention. Colleagues who we more active and reliant on the team had a difficult time though, so to keep the team together and motivated, that personal contact was important. (R6)

I went through personal problems at the time, although I had little difficulty with the pandemic itself. Regardless, it was very nice to feel that people think of you and involve you.. Work remained a nice and safe space. (R10)

Participants taking on (partial) leadership roles acknowledged that some people demanded more attention than others, but also highlighted the importance of reaching the ones who were doing relatively well.

Unconsciously, I think the focus shifted somewhat. There was more attention for the ones that had a tougher time, because they were asking for more support.. There should be attention paid to every single employee during these times, for the ones who are okay just as much as the ones who are not, otherwise you might lose them. (R1)

Personal attention was crucial. It was very clear that some people found it to be extremely tough.. We tried to open a conversation about it, make space for struggles and give an example on how to cope with it. (R4)

It stands out that the older participants (like R2, R3 and R4) reported a need for emotional support for themselves, whereas younger respondents (like R6, R7 and R10) reported to have mostly noticed a need for support among colleagues, but not or only a little for themselves. Arguably, this is related to the observation that the most important changes in the work environment were that people had to work digitally and from home. It was broadly reported in the introductory part of the interviews that the municipalities had always worked on location, and with a limited implementation of digital assets and processes. This sudden shift to a remote work environment will thus have been more difficult for the more experienced participants, having worked in the old environment for the majority of their career, causing stress or frustration. Their young coworkers, probably being more tech-savvy and recently coming from a study-environment, where activities are largely individualized and often done (digitally) from home, might have had an easier time. This observation is also in line with an earlier paragraph on laissez-faire leadership, where it was argued that older participants look unfavorably upon the leadership style because they required extra guidance in this shift to a digital workspace, for the same reasons given here. It is therefore once again encouraged to analyze these leadership styles in the context of a different case.

Something else that stood out was that all of the participants from Gouda considered individualized consideration more important, whereas out of the six participants from The Hague, only two reported that preference. This might be related to the fact that all participants who mentioned desiring laissez-faire leadership during the pandemic were all from the Hague, while nobody from Gouda highlighted this desire. This difference could be explained by the age difference between the organizations, since the participants from Gouda were generally older than those from the Hague. Another difference between the municipalities that might be related to this discrepancy is that The Hague is a lot larger than Gouda. It can be assumed that this larger organization will be more hierarchical, professionalized and individualized compared to a smaller one. If passive leadership is in higher demand in a larger organization, the same could be true for engaged active leadership in a smaller one.

The other ‘individualized consideration’-hypothesis stated that public servants would consider the facilitation of personal development, one of the two main aspects of this metric, not to be extra important during times of crisis in comparison to emotional support (H3d). It should be noted that the 'individualized consideration' was coded as a whole, and the two aspects were not coded separately. Therefore, 'emotional support' and 'personal development' have no separate importance score, and there is thus no 'statistical basis' to link to the hypothesis. Regardless, all participants were explicitly asked about the place personal development had in the situation they experienced. Based on their answers, it can be stated that **hypothesis H3d was supported**. Although generally not explicitly stated, attention to personal development was often considered not to be a priority. Derived from the subtext of participants' answers, there seemed to be a lot of understanding for the fact that other things were more important. The participants did not seem disappointed or upset by this.

> *We had to switch from development to innovation, and we had to do a lot of it. Within that process, personal development was hard.. I don't want to use the word survival, but let's say that the focus was not on attending courses or educating people. (R4)*

> *No, obviously it was impossible to follow training, but I thought everything was very interesting.. I learned a great deal from the pandemic, but not necessarily through my supervisor. (R8)*

The fact that personal development was generally not considered a priority does not mean that the ability to learn was discarded. Multiple respondents mentioned that an effort was made to ensure that the facilities to grow remained largely intact, as if there was no crisis. This could mean that it was done elsewhere, digitally or practically, by involving colleagues. Although some believe that this was not very successful, a few participants mentioned whether they think this was important or not.

> *Development on a group level was absolutely paused, because we could not see each other.. Individual learning could continue and was facilitated, but I don't think this was done often because people had to do it on their own. (R1)*

I don't think that [learning] *changed. You could continue developing. Due to close collaboration in the department, it was ensured that did not stagnate. (R2)*

In the traineeship it [attention to personal growth] *was present, but not on the position itself. It should be said, however, that this was discussed with my supervisor, and it was decided to move my training wholly to the traineeship. (R7)*

It was continued but organized differently.. Guidance was given digitally, only by colleagues, and only on request.. People who are not so outgoing risked being halted in their development, yes. (R9)

Out of the ten participants, only one explicitly stated that the attention for his professional development was very valuable. This argument, however, seems highly situational, and does not seem to imply a general preference for personal growth during a crisis.

I never had to diminish my ambition. During the absence of my coordinator, I could step in and was given the opportunity to climb to a leadership function. So yeah, it was very important for me that space for ambition and growth remained. (R10)

The observation that personal development seems to be no priority among public servants is in line with Maslow's pyramid, as discussed in the literary review. While needs like safety, belonging and respect are still being threatened by the crisis, it is reasonable to assume that employees will consider self-actualization a secondary need (Kenrick, et. al., 2010). While they appreciate the facilitation of regular training, participants seem to understand leaders as they decide not to prioritize the development of their followers. As the situation stabilizes, it should become visible that this becomes more important again, but this study does not cover a large enough timeframe to see that in the results. Further research on the relationship between the importance of personal development and organizational instability could provide clarity on this relationship, but other subjects on leadership in crisis situations seem more relevant to study.

4.4 Combining transactional and transformational leadership

The last hypothesis formed in the literature review was based on both transformational and transactional leadership. The hypothesis stated that both transactional and transformational leadership would be considered extra important in times of crisis, and to roughly the same degree (H4). **Hypothesis H4 is not supported.** Transactional had an average importance score of 2, transformational one of 5.7, displaying that the respondents had a considerably bigger need for transformational leadership behaviors than transactional behaviors during the COVID-19 pandemic. This difference in scores is mostly caused by the fact that a system of goals and rewards was not considered necessary by any participants, dropping the transactional average by a lot. Regardless, the participants still scored all transformational metrics the same or higher than the highest-rated transactional one. That being said, four out of ten participants considered at least one element of both leadership styles extra important.

> *The right combination is the one where structure and vision were implemented quickly and effectively on the one hand, and personal attention was portrayed on a municipal scale on the other. (R2)*

> *I expect my supervisor to be like a captain on a ship, by giving both clarity and involving people in his vision. (R10)*

Despite this being a minority among the population, a desire for a combination of the two styles is in line with what was expected based on the literature. From transactional leadership, the initiation of structure is mentioned by every respondent. Within transformational leadership, these preferences differ, but the charismatic and exemplary behavior is most often mentioned in combination with the initiation of structure. This is not surprising, as shaping a structure can easily be considered an element of a larger vision. If this is the case, acting as an example and champion of your own vision should be a logical result of this process. In other words, despite technically stemming from different leadership styles, these behaviors can easily go hand in hand.

The reason transformational leadership is preferred seems to be that it simply adheres better to people's priorities during a crisis. As said in the first part of the literature review, a crisis makes people stressed, uncertain and dependent on others (Boin, Hart & Kuipers, 2018). As a result, people primarily require comfort, clarity and support. These three are all provided by transformational leadership. Clear communication provides information and clarity, even if there is no new structure yet. Personal consideration can provide comfort. Both of these behaviors provide support. Transactional leadership, on the other hand, is primarily concerned with the establishment of structure and workflow to stabilize the relationships of exchange. Although structure can help by providing clarity, it will not be as successful at providing comfort and support as the aforementioned behaviors.

Another reason that this hypothesis is not supported could have something to do with the fact that the transition to a digital organization was the most tangible consequence in this crisis. Digital settings are perceived by many as more ambiguous (Purvanova & Bono, 2009). This means that effectively, to combat the ambiguity of the crisis, work is moved to another ambiguous environment. Considering that transformational leadership, particularly of the charismatic kind, flourishes in an ambiguous environment (Shamir & Howell, 1999), it makes sense that this 'additional' ambiguity pushed the need for transformational behaviors even more to the foreground. Whether there is a positive relation between environmental ambiguity and the demand for transformational leadership cannot be proven by this study, but it seems reasonable to assume as much.

5. Conclusion

The goal of this exploratory study was twofold. Primarily, it was attempted to improve our understanding of public leadership preferences in times of crisis. To do so, the research question was asked '*what leadership style preferences do public servants have in times of crisis?'*. Based research from the fields of public administration, crisis management and psychology, it was hypothesized that laissez-faire leadership would not be desired, whereas transformational and transactional leadership would be needed to equal degree. The question was answered by interviewing employees of the municipalities of The Hague and Gouda on their experiences during the first two months of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This study finds that there is a strong preference for transformational leadership behavior. This is in line with what earlier studies found on community leadership preferences (Boehm, Enoshm & Michal, 2010), in the context of a corporate organization (Giessner & Knippenberg, 2008) or from a top-down perspective (Zhang, Jia & Gu, 2012). These studies all state that transformational leadership is beneficial in times of crisis, as it helps to decrease anxiety among people or employees and to provide them clarity on what to expect from their leaders.

Transactional leadership and laissez-faire leadership were both considered important to a an equally lesser degree. This implies that there are also situations where passivity is preferred in times of crisis, as it enables people to work quickly and efficiently, as well as shape their work situation to their personal needs. This is surprising, given that crisis management and leadership studies seem to be in agreement that this leadership style is ineffective (Backhouse & Vogel, 2021; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2022). In terms of specific transactional and transformational actions, clear communication, individualized consideration and the initiation of structure were prioritized by most.

It is hard to illustrate the practical implications of this study, given that the data in this study can hardly be considered reliable. As a result, the most important 'implication' of the findings is that it has become clear that the scientific community still has a lot of work to do. Given that some important observations were made that are not in line with the logic of existing literature, it can be argued that a crisis has substantial effects on leadership preferences in a public organization. To prove this, however, further research will be necessary.

Regardless, assuming that the conclusions drawn from this study are representative for the real world, some very practical courses of action can be advised. The most obvious one is that public leaders should be aware of the fact that, in times of crisis, most of their followers will prefer transactional behaviors, particularly clear, frequent communication and emotional involvement, in the early critical phase of the crisis. This means that a leader should facilitate information or update channels and social support systems as soon as possible. Notably, these are considered more important than the communication of a new vision, policy or work structure. This implies that people are willing to accept that a supervisor simply has no plan or strategy in the first phase of a crisis, as long as this, as long as active involvement and the progress made is openly communicated. Furthermore, given that all three leadership styles enjoy the preference of some people, leaders should acknowledge that all people experience crisis in a different way, and thus have varying needs. The majority preferring a transformational disposition does not mean that there isn’t also a group in need of laissez-faire leadership. It is a supervisor’s job to engage with their employees to such a degree that their individual needs can be identified. Ideally, the leader acts in accordance with these wishes, as long as these are not in conflict with the preferences of other colleagues. Lastly, any reader who considers implementing the advice given in this thesis should be aware of the fact that all statements are made with the underlying motivation that this is what *employees want.* It does not mean that these statements are also the best way to tackle the direct problems of the crisis, the best means to maintain performance numbers or the best way of staying in control of the situation.

By mapping public leadership preferences and the mechanisms surrounding it, many opportunities for further research could be identified as well, thereby achieving the second goal of the study. These suggestions are largely linked to the limitations of this thesis. Two main directions of further research flow from this study: confirmative and expansive research. Confirmative research is important to conduct on this subject because of the many limitations and low generalizability of the findings in this study. The study is conducted on a very small scale, the instrument used is hard to generalize by nature and there is hardly any statistical information to support the claims. Furthermore, the case of the COVID-19 pandemic is quite unique in nature, particularly due to the forced digitalization being the primary source of uncertainty. Studying the same research question in a different crisis context, like a natural disaster, should be conducted to see whether the claims hold up. The same goes for the chosen organizations. These two municipalities are a very limited sample and are not generalizable to the rest of the world. In summary: further research is needed to confirm the claims made in this thesis, both by conducting quantitative research on the subject and by repeating the study using different cases.

This could also help solve the problem of the incomplete overview. As stated, the final question was biased towards preferable instead of undesirable behaviors. This might have caused participants to refrain from stating unwanted practices. Furthermore, some metrics (like contingent rewards) were never mentioned as either preferable or unwanted, which indicates more of an indifferent disposition towards these behaviors. A quantitative study could use an importance scale per metric, resulting in a more complete importance overview, while also accounting for indifference. This might either produce different results or confirm aforementioned arguments, but would be beneficial either way.

Further expansive research would extend the scientific knowledge on this subject beyond the limits of what was tested in this study. As stated, the three leadership styles used in this thesis might not be the most suitable framework for this question. Yukl's 'effective leadership behaviors'-framework (2012) takes a more practical approach, which would not only provide clearer metric for the participants, but also involve interesting leadership behaviors that were not really covered in this study. Furthermore, the observation that multiple participants explicitly preferred passive leadership over active leadership was a surprising find. Existing research on the subject considered this leadership style ineffective and largely dismissed it as such, but it seems there is a demand for it anyways. Self-Determination Theory already acknowledged the importance of autonomy in the workplace, but public administration research could also reexamine this aspect of leadership. Not only would it be interesting to see whether there are benefits to laissez-faire leadership in the context of a crisis, but the way this style is tested should be evaluated as well. The widely used manners of studying leadership might not be the right way to find whether laissez-faire leadership works, and in which contexts.

Primarily, this study finds a preference for transformational leadership among public servants in times of crisis, while laissez-faire and transactional leadership are considered equally less important. Research to confirm the findings in this study, expanding the knowledge of this subject through different leadership frameworks and reexamining the position of laissez-faire leadership in the scientific discourse are the most important recommendations for further research based on this thesis. The writer of this thesis is positive that there are a lot more interesting mechanisms to be found in this specific corner of leadership studies, and he invites and encourages readers to build on the foundation he tried to establish in this project.

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Appendix A – Message to potential participants (in Dutch)

Beste lezer,

In het kader van zijn masterscriptie zoekt een vriend van mij, Mark Kenter, enkele kandidaten die kort met hem zouden willen praten over de werkzaamheden in de gemeente ten tijde van corona, en hoe leiderschap hier voor jou een rol in speelt. Indien je ten tijde van de uitbraak van de pandemie werkte voor de gemeente en supervisie/leiding kreeg in welke vorm dan ook is dat voldoende om mee te doen aan het onderzoek.

Het gesprek zelf vindt plaats voor 15 april en duurt ongeveer een half uurtje. Voor de deelnemer bevat het onderzoek - buiten het gesprek zelf om - geen (voorbereidend) werk, noch een enquête achteraf. Het gesprek kan per telefoon of Zoom (of ieder ander vergelijkbaar medium) plaatsvinden, maar hij is ook graag bereid richting Gouda te komen om elkaar te spreken onder het genot van een kop koffie. Uiteraard is het onderzoek anoniem te doen en wordt, buiten de informatie gegeven tijdens het gesprek om, vertrouwelijk met persoonsgegevens omgegaan.

Mocht je bereid zijn - of zelfs enthousiast! - om met het onderzoek mee te doen kun je mij een berichtje sturen en neemt Mark contact met je op om een afspraak te maken. Anderzijds kun je hem ook mailen op kenter.mark@gmail.com of bellen op 0658856988. Alvast heel erg bedankt, je zou hem er ontzettend mee helpen!

Appendix B - Participant data overview (anonymized)

Resp. #	Organization	Position March `20	Position April `23	Years in position	Leadership Experience	Gender	Age Group	Interview date	Interview means
1	Municipality of Gouda	Social district coordinator	Municipal coordinator Social Support	2.5	Yes	F	30-40	April 11th	Zoom
2	Municipality of The Hague	Senior Procurement Advisor	Procurement advisor & contract manager	7	No	M	50-60	April 11th	Phone call
3	Municipality of Gouda	Contract Manager Security & Healthcare	Contract Manager Security & Healthcare	5	No	M	50-60	April 12th	Face to face
4	Municipality of Gouda	Social support, security & development director, Muni. Of Rotterdam	City Manager/ General Director Muni. of Gouda	1,5	Yes	M	40-50	April 12th	Face to face
5	Municipality of The Hague	Procurement Trainee	Producurement Advisor	2	No	F	20-30	April 13th	Zoom
6	Municipality of The Hague	Senior Procurement Advisor	Senior Procurement Advisor	3	No	M	20-30	April 13th	Zoom
7	Municipality of The Hague	Innovation Trainee	Board Advisor Business Operations	1,5	No	F	20-30	April 14th	Zoom
8	Municipality of The Hague	Board Secretary on Social Affairs	Board Secretary on Business Operations	4	No	M	30-40	April 17th	Zoom
9	Municipality of The Hague	Temporary Business Partner & Procurement Advisor	Procurement Advisor	26	Yes	M	50-60	April 19th	MS Teams
10	Municipality of Gouda	Policy Officer Social Support	Senior Work & Finance Employee	0,5	Yes	M	30-40	April 19th	Zoom

Appendix C – Semi-structured Interview Guide

Introduction

Shortly introduce the study to the interviewee, obtain a signature on the informed consent form and permission to record the interview, and follow with these questions:

- Could you briefly introduce yourself, stating your formal position, how long you have worked at this position and what your position was during the COVID-19 pandemic?

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

This group of questions is aimed at identifying the impact of the pandemic on the interviewee's work environment, while simultaneously having the interviewee reminisce about this period in his/her career.

- Could you illustrate what your work situation looked like before the pandemic struck?
- Could you broadly illustrate how your work situation was impacted by the global outbreak?
- How did this change in the work environment impact your personal life?
- What action did your superior take to combat the insecurities of this changed situation?
- Which aspects - if there are any - of these actions still remain in your current work environment?

Leadership preferences

In this last part, a couple of leadership behaviors are presented, upon which the interviewee is asked to retrospectively respond with how important said behavior was for him/her in times of the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants were asked to start with a general illustration of its importance by means of a short response like 'quite important', 'indifferent' or 'not at all', after which a short motivation for their answer was asked. In addition, interviewees were asked whether the importance of this attribute changed in comparison to before the pandemic, or current-day preferences.

How important is it that a leader portrays..

- … Charismatic and exemplary behavior, (which means behavior that inspires an energizing sense of common purpose, is a role model to look up to in times of uncertainty and builds identification with the leader's person and his or her articulated vision?)
- … Clear communication and frequent updating, (which means behavior focused on openly and accessibly communicating relevant information to the team from within and outside the organization?)
- … Individualized consideration, (which means behavior focused on understanding the needs of each follower and continuously enabling them to reach their full potential?)
- … a system of goals and according rewards and consequences, (which means behavior which clarifies what is expected from followers and what employees will receive if they do or do not meet expected levels of performance?)
- … initiation of work structure, (which means behavior which presents clear goals, insists on exact standards of executions and demands their followers to carefully obey the agreed-upon rules and regulations to achieve those goals?)
- … a passive disposition, (which means giving followers the authority and trust to make their own decision and actions, without interference or monitoring, and only acts as a leader when requested to do so by the followers?)

- Which ones of these jump out as notably more or less important to you in a crisis situation, compared to periods of stability? Is there a difference between the stability before and after the pandemic?
- Do you have things to add to what we discussed that might be beneficial to the study?

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Appendix D – Informed Consent Form

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Information and Purpose: The interview, for which you are being asked to participate in, is a part of a research study that is focused on public servant leadership preferences in times of organizational crisis. The purpose of this study is explore perceived public servant needs, with a focus on what aspects of leadership are deemed important through their own perspective. The study is supervised by Mr Kohei Suzuki from the University of Leiden.

Your Participation: Participation consists of one interview, lasting approximately thirty minutes. This interview will be audio recorded and conducted in English, unless otherwise requested by the participant. There may be additional follow-up/clarification through email, unless otherwise requested by the participant. Privacy will be ensured through confidentiality. This participation is voluntary and the interviewee has the right to terminate the interview at any time.

Confidentiality: Your name and identifying information will not be associated with any part of the written report of the research. All of your information and interview responses will be kept confidential. The researcher will not share your individual responses with anyone other than the research supervisor.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact the researcher:

Name: Mark Kenter

Telephone: +31658856988

Email: kenter.mark@gmail.com

By signing below, I acknowledge that I have read and understood the above information. I am aware that I can discontinue my participation in the study at any time.

Signature ______________ Date______________

Appendix E – Coding Form

Leadership style scores per metric and average leadership style score

		Leadership Styles		
		Laissez Faire	Transactional	Transformational
M	Charisma	-	-	4
E	Communication	-	-	7
T	Consideration	-	-	6
R	Goals/Rewards	-	0	-
I C	Structure	-	4	-
S	Passivity	2	-	-
	Average	2	2	5.7

Leadership style metric scores per respondent and total scores per metric

		Metrics					
		CHAR	COMM	INCO	GO/RE	STRU	PASS
R	Respondent 1		1	1			
E	Respondent 2		1	1			-1
S	Respondent 3	1		1		1	
P	Respondent 4	1		1			
O	Respondent 5		1	1		-1	1
N	Respondent 6	1	1			1	
D	Respondent 7			1		1	1
E	Respondent 8		1				1
N T	Respondent 9					1	
S	Respondent 10	1		1		1	
	Total	4	5	7	0	4	2