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## The practice of experienced CEOs: Relational leaders challenging crisis situations

*A prática de CEOs experientes: Líderes relacionais enfrentando situações de crise*

*La práctica de los CEO experimentados: Líderes relacionales ante situaciones de crisis*

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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** Most studies on leadership mainly focus on the role of the leader, seeking to understand the most appropriate style of behavior to lead, considering leadership a one-sided phenomenon. As a result, they end up neglecting some important roles among those led, such as, for example, the reciprocal relationship between leaders and followers and the influence of organizations in this relationship. Moving from the understanding of a traditional leadership to a Relational Leadership becomes, therefore, an important step towards understanding the phenomenon of leadership.

**Purpose:** This article analyzes how highly successful and experienced CEOs who have been leading large corporations perceive the influence of Relational Leadership to overcome moments of organizational and personal crisis.

**Method:** In the qualitative research, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 CEOs (9 men and 3 women, around 60 years old) that have been leaders of several corporations in Brazil and abroad for more than 30 years.

**Results:** The results show that the CEOs perceived the strong and positive influence of relational leadership to successfully face economic, political and personal crisis. The CEOs practices are related to the Relational Leadership Theory: 1) multilateral relationship; 2) human social construction; 3) relationships based on trust; 4) collective dimension; 5) communication to foster better decisions. These practices were also identified as antidotes to the solitude of power inherent to the CEOs' position.

**Conclusions:** Successful CEOs who have walked a long road leading corporations perceive the strong and positive influence of Relational Leadership to face crisis. So, the study has theoretical implications when it points out Relational Leadership as effective in crisis situations, since the literature relates crisis with transformational leadership in most cases.

**Keywords:** relational leadership theory; multilateral relations; loneliness of power; organizational crisis; CEOs.

### RESUMO

**Contextualização:** A maioria dos estudos sobre liderança foca no papel do líder, buscando entender o estilo de comportamento mais adequado para liderar, considerando a liderança um fenômeno unilateral. Com isso, acabam negligenciando alguns papéis importantes dos liderados, como por exemplo, a relação recíproca entre líderes e liderados e a influência das organizações nessa relação. Passar do entendimento de uma liderança tradicional para uma Liderança Relacional torna-se, portanto, um passo importante para o entendimento do fenômeno da liderança.

**Objetivo:** Este artigo analisa como CEOs bem-sucedidos e experientes, que lideram grandes organizações percebem a influência da Liderança Relacional para superar momentos de crise organizacional e pessoal.

**Método:** Na pesquisa qualitativa, entrevistas semiestruturadas foram feitas com 12 CEOs (9 homens e 3 mulheres com 60 anos em média) que vem liderando empresas de grande porte no Brasil e no exterior por mais de 30 anos.

**Resultados:** Os resultados mostram que os CEOs consideram a liderança relacional como essencial quando enfrentaram crises econômicas, políticas e pessoais. As práticas dos CEOs estão relacionadas com a Teoria da Liderança Relacional: 1) relação multilateral; 2) construção social humanista; 3) relacionamentos baseados na confiança; 4) dimensão coletiva; 5) comunicação para impulsionar melhores decisões. Estas práticas também foram identificadas como antídotos contra a solidão do poder inerente ao cargo de CEO.

**Conclusões:** CEOs de sucesso, com longa trajetória liderando corporações, percebem a forte influência positiva da Liderança Relacional para enfrentar crises com efetividade. Assim, este estudo traz importantes implicações teóricas ao apontar a Liderança Relacional como eficaz em situações de crise, uma vez que a literatura relaciona efetividade na crise com a Liderança Transformacional.

**Palavras-chave:** teoria da liderança relacional; relações multilaterais; solidão do poder; crises organizacionais; CEOs.

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**RESUMEN**

**Contextualización:** La mayoría de los estudios sobre liderazgo focan en el papel del líder, buscando comprender el estilo de comportamiento más adecuado para liderar, apuntando al liderazgo como un fenómeno unilateral. Como resultado, terminan descuidando algunos roles importantes de los liderados, como, por ejemplo, la relación recíproca entre líderes y liderados y la influencia de las organizaciones en esta relación. Pasar de la comprensión de un liderazgo tradicional a un Liderazgo Relacional se convierte, por tanto, en un paso importante hacia la comprensión del fenómeno del liderazgo.

**Propósito:** Este artículo analiza cómo los CEOs exitosos y experimentados, que han liderado grandes organizaciones perciben la influencia del Liderazgo Relacional para superar momentos de crisis organizacional y personal.

**Metodo:** En la investigación cualitativa, se realizaron entrevistas semiestructuradas con 12 directores generales (9 hombres y 3 mujeres con una edad promedio de 60 años) que llevan más de 30 años al frente de grandes empresas en Brasil y en el exterior.

**Resultados:** Los resultados muestran que los CEOs consideran el liderazgo relacional como fundamental a la hora de afrontar crisis económicas, políticas y personales. Las prácticas del CEO están relacionadas con la Teoría del Liderazgo Relacional: 1) relación multilateral; 2) construcción social humanista; 3) relaciones basadas en la confianza; 4) dimensión colectiva; 5) comunicación para impulsar mejores decisiones. Estas prácticas también han sido identificadas como antídotos contra la soledad del poder inherente al rol de CEO.

**Conclusiones:** Los CEOs exitosos, con una larga trayectoria liderando corporaciones, perciben la fuerte influencia positiva del Liderazgo Relacional para enfrentar las crisis de manera efectiva. Así, este estudio tiene importantes implicaciones teóricas al señalar el Liderazgo Relacional como efectivo en situaciones de crisis, ya que la literatura relaciona más el Liderazgo Transformacional con la efectividad en situaciones de crisis.

**Palabras-clave:** teoría del liderazgo relacional; relaciones multilaterales; soledad del poder; crisis organizacionales; CEOs.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

This article analyzes how highly regarded, successful and experienced CEOs who have been leading corporations operating in Brazil and abroad for more than 30 years perceive the level of influence of Relational Leadership to overcome organizational and personal crisis. These CEOs have been continuously occupying top strategic positions and therefore are fundamental to researching the perception of crucial decision-making. Moreover, it is important to analyze whether and how these CEOs share their responsibilities with others as a way of overcoming crisis.

This paper addresses the complexity of the relationship not only between leaders and followers, as depicted in the Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory (Barbuto, Wilmot & Story, 2011; Zhang, Jia & Gu, 2012). The focus here is on the relationship that encompasses all the multilateral network of relationships among people and stakeholders involved in the organization's social process (leaders, followers, coworkers, customers, peers, stakeholders representatives, etc) as depicted in the Relational Leadership Theory. This multilateral relationship is put by some authors as indispensable to understand the leadership in the current world (Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012; Akram, Lei, Hussain, Haider & Akram, 2016; Henry & Wolfgramm, 2018).

For so many decades leadership has been discussed under rather different perspectives (Gandolfi & Stone, 2017), such as: Blake's Behavioral theory (Blake & Mouton, 1994); Charismatic Leadership (House, 1977; Conger, 1991; Halverson, Murphy & Riggio, 2004); Visionary Leadership (Westley & Mintzberg, 1989); Laissez-faire Leadership (Bass & Avolio, 1999); Transactional and Transformational leadership (Burns, 1978; Bass, 1985; Bass & Avolio, 1990). Most studies discussing leadership under these perspectives focus mainly on the role of the leader, seeking to understand the most appropriate style of behavior and the main characteristics to lead (Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012; Gandolfi & Stone, 2016). These studies are based on the perception of leadership as a unilateral phenomenon, focused excessively on the leader and somehow forgetting followers and peers (Gandolfi & Stone, 2017).

Because of this unilateral vision, several leadership theories end up hiding some important roles among the followers (Versiani, Caeiro & Carvalho, 2017). For example, these theories do not consider reciprocal relationship between leaders and followers and the influence of organizations in this relationship. In addition, it limits the perception of leadership as a social process, in which realities are built and undergo constant and necessary changes to understand the dynamics of leadership (Uhl-Bien et al., 2006; Akram et al., 2016; Uhl-Bien & Carsten, 2018; D'Ávila, Oliveira, Diniz & Sant'Anna, 2020; Silva, Filippim & Sant'Anna, 2020; Mendes, Sant'Anna & Diniz, 2021).

To move from the traditional leadership into a Relational Leadership it is important to understand all these

roles (Hosking, 1988). It is not enough just pointing out what the leaders do and what they should be, but also reinforce the aspects that can contribute to the interactions and relationships, collaborating with further studies on leadership (Uhl-Bien et al., 2006; Kurucz, Colbert, Lüdeke Friend, Upward & Willard, 2017; Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018).

This study has theoretical implications when it points out Relational Leadership as effective in crisis situations, since the literature relates crisis mostly with transformational leadership. Thus, leadership in this study is considered as a relational phenomenon, based on the assumption that it occurs in the face of different realities, in different directions and producing changes that may arise internally or externally to the organization and individuals (Sant'Anna, Nelson & Carvalho, 2015; Uhl-Bien & Carsten, 2018; D'Ávila et al., 2020; Silva, Filippim & Sant'Anna, 2020; Mendes, Sant'Anna & Diniz, 2021). Thus, relationships can change among all these actors, continuously reformulating, reshaping, the organizational reality that was itself collectively built (Dachler, 1992).

Organizations live in permanent change, sometimes even turbulent turnarounds, in tune with an extremely challenging business environment. The most challenging moments are those of crisis located either at the macro level (economic sector, economy throwbacks) or at the micro level (professional and/or individual scope). A crisis can then be considered a situation that provokes drastic changes that need to be managed so that organizations can continue to perform well and relationships do not become compromised (Nalin & Cassandre, 2017; Vicentini, Pizzutti & Carvalho, 2018; Story, 2020).

A crisis always become a challenge through which organizations pass by and produces relational tensions. The study of Haddon, Loughlin and McNally (2015) point out that in moments of crisis individuals in an organization expect leaders to act quickly and, at the same time, use communication as a continuous tool. The study of Kurucz, Colbert, Lüdeke-Friend, Upward and Willard (2017) contributes to the development of a conceptual model of Relational Leadership as a strategy to deal with relational tensions that challenge the integration of multiple stakeholders. Fairhurst and Connaughton (2014) highlight the importance of communication in Relational Leadership as the way in which the actors shape relationships.

Relational leadership, therefore, reflects a move away from viewing leadership at the individual level as a behaviour, toward understanding leadership as a collective capacity created as a result of the multilateral relationships among all kind of people inside and outside the organization (Kurucz et al., 2017). Based on this premise and seeking to address the theoretical gaps presented, this study sought to analyze the perception of twelve experienced executives, CEOs of large companies, regarding the effectiveness of relational leadership during crisis.

This study has the potential to contribute in three directions. First, by identifying aspects of relational leadership that are effective in crisis contexts, the study offers elements for organizations, their leaders and

individuals to develop strategies to deal with tensions and challenges in contexts of change. Second, the study is based on one of the most contemporary approaches to the field of leadership (Relational), which moves the focus on the leader to the multilateral relationships. Third, this study allows us to capture the vision of an audience that is difficult to access, particularly experienced top executives who have been leading large companies in Brazil and abroad for more than 30 years.

This article is structured in five sections. After this contextualization, the literature review includes a discussion of the relational approach to leadership, one of the most contemporary in the field. The method section includes a description of how the interviews with executives were carried out and how the data was analyzed and treated. Next, executives' perceptions of the aspects of relational leadership that are effective in crisis contexts are presented, such as building trust based on the leader's example; the relevance of the collective dimension and communication. The article ends with the main conclusions of the research, its limitations and recommendations for future studies.

## 2 THE THEORY OF RELATIONAL LEADERSHIP AS A SOCIAL PROCESS

Contributing with new perspectives within the numerous discussions about leadership, a theory of Relational Leadership discussed in depth by Uhl-Bien (2006), one of the former authors of the LMX theory (Leader-Member Exchange), points out that leadership is not supported by the idea of a personal gift or a genetically inherited attribute as pointed out by the Theory of Traits or the focus on behaviors that individuals adopt to be effective leaders, as Behavioral Theories are based.

Although the relational approach recognizes the relevance of leader behaviors, the focus of analysis is on multilateral relationships in different directions - and not just those between "leader-member" - going beyond the individual, encompassing organizational and inter-organizational levels and the societal level. A characteristic of relational leadership is, in this sense, the importance attributed to multidimensionality, incorporating both the level of the macrocontext and the organizational and microphysical environments in which it is carried out (Sant'Anna, 2021).

The relational approach also advances in relation to LMX Theory, which predefines a specific type of interpersonal dyadic relationship between leader-member/member-leader (Dansereau, Graen & Haga, 1975; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Liden & Maslyn, 1998; Sears & Hackett, 2011; Volmer; Spurr & Niessen, 2012; Kauppila, 2016; Seo, Nahrgang, Carter & Hom, 2018). In this sense, the relational approach goes beyond this discussion by pointing out that leaders, member/followers and other individuals involved are considered "relational beings" who constitute themselves as such in a dynamic relational context in continuous development and modification (Endres & Weibler, 2017; Uhl-Bien & Carsten, 2018; D'ávila

et al., 2020). In other words, the relationship of exchange and influence occurs continuously in different directions and with different agents involved, not just the leader and the followers (Mendes, Sant'Anna & Diniz, 2021).

Unlike the LMX theory, the Relational Theory is, first of all, an action of influence that takes into account the individual attributes in view of the collective, which is in a context and in a dynamic relationship. That is, as a social process, socially constructed. In other words, Relational Leadership acts as a process of social influence and is constructed and produced in individual actions (in a given context), in social construction and/or in the process of creation or change (Uhl-Bien, 2006; Henry & Wolfgramm, 2018; Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018; Silva, Filippim & Sant'Anna, 2020; Mendes, Sant'Anna & Diniz, 2021).

The proposal to study leadership based on a relationship-oriented behavior has been discussed initially by Stogdill and Coons (1957) in a behavioral traditional discourse in which leadership studies examines, in the most individual/independent context, styles of behaviors that are oriented towards relationships such as seen, for example, in Likert (1961) and in Blake and Mouton (1994). However, the terminology "Relational Leadership Theory" was used for the first time time after that in Brower et al. (2000) and Drath (2001), in which a relational orientation is based on processes, in a human social building with interdependent connections.

But it is the study by Uhl-Bien (2003; 2006) that establishes the bases of the Relational Leadership theory when describes its concepts and associates them with a newest way of understanding the phenomenon of leadership, boosting new studies on the subject. Relational perspective understands organizations as networks of multilateral relationships elaborated by people who live in constant change in a complex interaction of effects between individuals and the system (organization) in which they are inserted (Sant'Anna et al., 2015; Mendes, Sant'Anna & Diniz, 2021).

In this sense, thinking about Relational theory is to affirm the collective. That is, the legitimated leader shares responsibilities with a network of several other people, all of whom are responsible for the kind of relationships they construct together. Certainly, this can be modified since people are sensitive to external and internal changes. The notion of "collective" receives a highlight in this theory where people are supposed to work together for a common goal (Abell & Simons, 2000; Uhl-Bien, 2006; Jian & Fairhurst, 2017; Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018). The social process should also be understood as a relational dynamic because leadership is seen as a process by which systems also change through the buildings of roles and relationships (Fletcher, 2004; Uhl-Bien, 2003; Uhl-Bien, 2005; Smit & Scherman, 2016).

One of the features of this theory is communication. According to the seminal studies of Dachler (1988; 1992) and Hosking (1988), relationships, in general, are intrinsically communicative, subject to different interpretations and to multiple meanings. It is noteworthy

that when these authors are talking about the power of communication, they do not refer only to spoken communication, face-to-face, but also to other forms of language, such as writing, non-verbal actions, body language, events, gestures (Klein, 2017).

In Relational Theory, there is also a clear concern to understand that leadership does not occur only through individuals who occupy managerial positions. On the opposite, leadership relationships can emerge at any instance of the organization and in any direction. Thus, it is fundamental to understand the way relationships are built at all levels to understand from where leadership emanates (D'Ávila et al., 2020; Silva, Filippim & Sant'Anna, 2020; Mendes, Sant'Anna & Diniz, 2021). After all, as discussed above, relational leadership is not only identified between a bilateral (leader-follower) relationship, but in a multilateral way. As such, it is possible to understand leadership as a set of interactive dynamics, since multilateral relationships occur in a given context.

International studies on relational leadership make important contributions to this field. Henry & Wolfgramm (2018) investigated indigenous tribes in New Zealand and observed that relational leadership is a process of social construction which emerges from the dynamic interaction between ontology (ways of being) and praxis (ways of doing). The relational perspective therefore changed the focus from individual to collective dynamics (culture).

Uhl-Bien and Arena (2018), in turn, talk about the importance of the role of relationship networks in the innovation process. The authors discuss two leadership styles: the adapter, which does not present many original ideas but is more capable of finding solutions that are programmable and appropriate to the context in which he operates; and ii) the innovator, who is better at bringing new perspectives and information through other means, with receptivity in networks of interconnected contacts favoring the increase of a sort of intrapreneurship.

In Brazil, contemporary studies have emphasized the relational approach to leadership (D'ávila et al., 2020; Mendes, Sant'Anna & Diniz, 2021; Sant'Anna, 2021). Observing professionals occupying strategic positions in different organizations, Sant'Anna, Nelson and Carvalho (2015) point out that the ability to build effective relationships is a central characteristic of this relational leadership style. The authors are based on the notion that the leader is located at the center of three dimensions: Individual-Organization-Society.

D'ávila et al. (2020) studied leaders from the Brazilian Army in the context of the United Nations Mission for the Stabilization of Haiti. Their study showed that the crisis context required a relational, people-oriented leadership. That is, sensitive to emotional problems of individuals. Therefore, leadership authority derives more from the ability to create positive relationship networks than from formal position.

Decision-making especially during crisis becomes an important point in understanding leadership as a social and relational process. The period of a crisis is an example of moments experienced by organizations, especially those that have been in the market for many years and have undergone different economic, political and social scenarios. In moments characterized by high uncertainty and instability, leaders need to consider the scenarios in which they are inserted as well as the individuality of each follower (Nalin & Cassandre, 2017; Vicentini, Pizzutti & Carvalho, 2018) and the relationships necessary to overcome the crisis.

Other studies on leadership in crisis contexts, such as the one by Nalin & Cassandre (2017), pointed out that the transformational leader is the most suitable in crisis situations. Other studies emphasize skills and attitudes required of leaders in crisis contexts (Vicentini, Pizzutti & Carvalho, 2018; Story, 2020), identifying some fundamental skills for leaders in times of economic, political and social changes such as flexibility, versatility, multi-qualification, ability to establish interpersonal relationships and emotional intelligence. Although, all these studies put the leader as the central actor in the exercise of leadership and not the relationships as the relational approach does.

### 3 METHODOLOGY

To achieve the goal of this study a qualitative research was conducted (Bardin, 2011), with recognized and experienced CEOs working in organizations from different economic sectors. The method was the case study based on the semi-structured individual interview technique, contributing to the understanding of Relational Leadership, a complex phenomenon. The semi-structured interviews made it possible to give voice to the interviewed executives as well as capture in depth their beliefs, experiences and behaviors throughout their long term experience as CEOs. The interest was to understand the meaning that executives give to the world around them (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007).

The individuals interviewed were men and women who spent more than three decades in average as business leaders at the highest strategic level of the organizations they worked for. Many of the respondents were still CEOs at the time of the interviews. Some had already been financial directors (CFOs), operating directors (COOs) and marketing directors (CMOs). Some currently still occupy positions in boards of directors in corporations. But most of the time, as noted in Table 1, they have been CEOs. In addition, they are leading very successful and reputable organizations at national and international levels. From Table 1 it is also possible to identify the profile of the interviewed CEOs and the organizations in which they acted and/or are still acting for a long period of time, also going through managerial, economic and personal crisis.

**Table 1**

Profile of the interviewed CEOs

CEO	Sex	Age	Sector of operation	Number of employees of the current corporation	Time as CEO (includes CFO, CMO, COO)
1	M	64	Financial	50,000	40 years
2	M	65	Technological and Sustainability	1,000	30 years
3	M	68	Architecture and Urbanism	30	44 years
4	M	62	Building	24,000	40 years
5	M	69	Health	400	30 years
6	M	77	Education	500	42 years
7	M	59	Diversified Technology	90,000	36 years
8	M	87	Aeronautical Engineering and Education	95,000	22 years
9	M	67	Beauty	8,000	20 years
10	F	64	Health	4,500	33 years
11	F	68	Department Store	24,000	27 years
12	F	62	Fashion	2,600	13 years

Source: Developed by the authors.

The criteria for choosing the interviewees were: i) seniority and career of at least 10 years as CEO; ii) high public recognition in corporate and business environments, that is, executives who made history in their organizations and in the business world in general. Access to these professionals was possible due to the qualified network established during decades with such contacts and information collected at Fundação Dom Cabral (FDC), a Brazilian business school founded in 1976 and internationally renowned. Due to confidentiality issues, the interviewees' identity will be preserved and they will be presented here as: CEO1, CEO2, CEO3 and so on. While organizations will be: E1, E2, E3, etc.

The interview guide included open questions related to the executives' experiences in leading in times of crisis, such as: 1) When did you realize yourself as a leader? Was there an event or episode that gave you this certainty? 2) What are the biggest difficulties you face(d) in this leadership task? 3) How did you face the crises that arose along the way? 4) Tell us a little about the decision-making process in crisis situations; 5) What sustained your leadership in times of crisis and doubts?; 6) In your view, how important are relationships in times of crisis?; Although a preliminary interview guide had been prepared, the executive had space to speak openly about other issues that they considered important.

Data collection was made in a reserved room space within the corporations' offices. The interviews took an average of 60 minutes each. All were recorded, upon authorization and subsequently transcribed to facilitate the data processing and content analysis process.

Data analysis was performed through content analysis by category, which consists of examining, categorizing, classifying and recombining evidence. It is called "categorical", as it consists of dividing the text with the interviewees' statements into categories according to analogical groupings in order to facilitate the organization and interpretation of qualitative data (Bardin, 2011). First, each executive's response was allocated to the six research questions defined in the previous script. From this stage onwards, exhaustive analyzes of each response were

carried out seeking to compare and identify convergent and divergent aspects in the different reports. Subsequently, we sought to identify recurring aspects that emerged in the executives' speeches but which were not included in the initial script, such as the category of "solitude in power". Finally, the empirical data was compared with the literature on the Relational Leadership Theory.

The next section includes the results regarding executives' experiences in crisis situations and was subdivided into the categories: i) Building trust by example; ii) Forming a Team: collectivism; iii) Taking decisions: the importance of communication.

#### 4 ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

Most interviewed CEOs talked about crisis they had gone through such as the several Brazilian political and economic crisis, managerial crisis and personal crisis that have reflected in the organizations they were leading. From these crisis they took important lessons when making important decisions. It was in these situations that they learned that adopting a multilateral relationship as in Uhl-Bien (2006) and Uhl-Bien and Arena (2018) was important to overcome the moments of crisis, regardless of the crisis experienced.

This perspective allows a presupposition that, contrary to the study of Zhang, Jia and Gu (2012), either in a crisis situation or in the day-to-day of organizations the relationship between people goes far beyond the quality of the exchange between leader-member as presented by LMX theory. This is due to the perception of the CEOs that a relationship is built in several, multilateral connections, even if things at first look like independent. In this way, people, functional areas within the corporations, corporate politics, the country's economy, the corporation's financial situation, personal multiple problems and professional experience are some of the interferences that influence the process of leadership.

So, differently from what is seen in the LMX theory as to the bidirectional dyadic relationship leader-follower, this research point to the importance that leaders give to

multilateral relations as in the Relational Theory (Uhl-Bien, 2006; Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018; Silva, Filippim & Sant'Anna, 2020; Mendes, Sant'Anna & Diniz, 2021), believing that looking at human beings and preserving good relationships in several directions, multi directions (with co-workers and peers also) are the foundations of a good leadership.

The research showed that this multilateral relationship offers a great help to survive in moments of crisis, allowing to have a "look inward" and a "look outward" the organization. That is, having an internal (inward) vision of the organization implies knowing to observe everyone separately at all hierarchical levels and at the same time as part of the group. On the other hand, the external (outward) vision extends the look to competitors, suppliers and customers, as well as on the economic and political situation of the business context. Thus, the multilateral relationship contemplates a network of relationships built inside and outside the organization, corroborating the literature (Uhl-Bien, 2006; Sant'Anna et al., 2015; Mendes, Sant'Anna & Diniz, 2021).

CEO 10 explains that all leaders within the organization learn that successful leadership should be able to look inward and outward at the same time, encouraging the relationship between these two environments to be always constructive. The CEO thinks that changes that occur in these two environments are always interlinked and leaders need to prioritize relationships to accomplish such changes:

When leaders can look inside and at the same time look at the market they are exceptional. For example, if we are experiencing a time of crisis in which we need to accelerate we will all accelerate; but if the time needs a brake, even if we are on a good position we need to brake and review all the processes [...] How many crisis we have lived in the past, where it was important to assume new attitudes and difficult decisions were made to lead. [...] If it were not with the help of the people and the relationships, we have established with each one of them, be it a supplier or an employee, we would not have arrived here with this baggage and going through so many crisis (CEO 10).

The phrase "together we are stronger", used by many of the interviewees, exemplifies and emphasizes their perception of the importance of the relationship to the phenomenon of leadership: "I learned that everything is done through relationships, contracts between people" (CEO 4); "I spoke about two points: personal relationships and trust. These are the foundations of the company to this day" (CEO 9). Both CEO2 and CEO1 believe that the biggest problem for organizations that are not building multilateral relationships can be in understanding where the problem is, as CEO1 says:

The problem is not in the areas, it is between the areas. That's a big phrase in my life. Or, by putting it in another way, there's nothing more wrong than when trying to solve a complex problem, separating it into parts and resolving each part of the part. Because the problem is not in these chosen parts, it is in the relationship between them (CEO1).

According to all CEOs respondents these multilateral relationships helps leadership in building trust, making decisions and forming a team, according to the literature (Uhl-Bien, 2003; 2005; 2006; Akram et al., 2016; Silva, Filippim & Sant'Anna, 2020; Mendes, Sant'Anna & Diniz, 2021). For the interviewees, building these multilateral relationships in organizations makes it much easier to face a crisis.

For a multilateral relationship to take place it is necessary that the organizational leaders (here represented by the CEOs) exercise, in the day-to-day, behaviors that stimulate the closer ties between the entities in Uhl-Bien (2016), here the individuals. This is described by the interviewees in a way that it is possible to group them into three complementary subcategories that are presented below: building trust by example; forming a team: collectivism; and taking decisions: communication versus the loneliness of power.

#### 4.1 Building trust by example: the responsibility of "do what I do"

Most respondents believe that giving an example is the best way to initiate the building of trust among people. The CEOs believe that, in a certain way, this contributes to face crisis moments, as seen in Haddon, Loughlin and McNally (2015).

As the interviewees have been on average for more than 30 years in top leadership positions, acting as CEOs, they understand that their behavior sets an example to be followed along time and influences the multilateral relationship. CEO 2 tells that, during an economic crisis his organization faced: "the experience accumulated over many years is a baggage that we bring so it accumulates and show the paths to follow or not follow and also do what you preach so that people trust you" (CEO 2).

Another relevant point, now raised by CEO 1, is the need for good humor when facing hard times. He said that in difficult moments the organization faced good humor helped the leadership to face the crisis in an easier way, becoming an example for the others. The interviewee strengthens this thought of good humor as a mission allied to responsibility. The leader needs to be responsible, but it can do this lightly. One needs to understand what's going on around him and tell he will be able to accomplish. To pass confidence to people in difficult times also comes from the way the leader acts. Whether he acts with serenity and good humor reinforces the multilateral relationship, promoting mutual trust among people.

However, if the leader behaves in a contradictory way with what he preaches, it automatically initiates a discrediting relationship: "a fair society needs responsible citizens. Every time I give an example I feel that my mission is being fulfilled by trust" (CEO 1). This is another finding that corroborates the literature when it allies the example of leadership to responsibility (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011). Everything that's perceived as a good way of doing things can be replicated.

So, regardless of the hierarchical level, the implicit responsibility in the example permeates the different areas of an organization and in the multilateral relationship the greater the influence by example, the greater the relationship of trust and the greater the responsibility of both leader and follower. The speeches of CEO 4 and 5 highlight this perception of the CEOs interviewed regarding the seriousness of practicing a leadership by example:

You can understand the leadership as someone who sees you doing interesting things and wants to imitate the leader in some way [...]. I think that if the leader aims one interesting thing people will want to look at the same side of it. I think that if the leader is cheerful and he believes so much in a certain thing people will want to experience the same thing (CEO 5).

Without false modesty, you have to set a good example too... I always worked well, I got here early (CEO 4).

It is possible to perceive in all the interviews that leadership by example is fundamental for organizations to have people who engage with their leaders. They are people who believe in the corporation and the potential of their teams. Inspiration by the other is a way of establishing trust and taking advantage of the best that each individual can offer. With this type of relationship established among the people of an organization it is possible that in crisis situations leaders, followers and peers have a reference in whom to trust and thus distance their effects.

It is noteworthy that, according to relational theory, people live in constant changes and suffer impacts of the several systems in which they are inserted (Uhi-bien et al., 2006; Akram et al., 2016; D'Ávila et al., 2020; Silva, Filippim & Sant'Anna, 2020; Mendes, Sant'Anna & Diniz, 2021). So, the influence of the example does not only come from within the organization. That is, a CEO can suffer influences from the examples of others outside the organization and consequently can influence the people who work within the organization. In different moments these influences can vary, people can change, behaviors can change, societal values can change and all the dynamics of the process can suffer several multilateral influences (Sim, 2019). This is a cycle that belongs to the social constructed process of the multilateral relationship (Jian & Fairhurst, 2017; Henry & Wolgramm, 2018).

In this way, acquiring trust becomes easier if one thinks the organization as a team, prevailing the collectivism instead of individualism: "the key word is trust, trust in the others. What one says is to contribute. Nobody wants to be better than anyone, nobody wants to take advantage in anything, everybody wants to get solutions to the crisis that arises "(CEO 2).

#### 4.2 Forming a team: collectivism

This category was unanimous among the CEOs interviewed. They believe that in all moments of crisis experienced by them, be it either a political, economic or personal crisis, think collectively and act as a team has been

extremely important (Dachler, 1992). The CEO 10 has an expression that portrays this very well: "a star alone doesn't make the sky shine and it will give clarity to no one".

Individualism cannot prevail when one intends to overcome a crisis and strengthen the bonds of good leadership. Forming a team to know how to deal with a crisis is essential. It goes from the search for trained professionals to know how to group the professionals already hired in activities according to their capacities and limitations, as the interviewee affirms:

Identify your strength, which strong points you have, which you can bring to the professional, personal and corporate world. For me one of the fundamental parts is to create, build and develop people. Definitely, having a team, people who think about the collective is the most important thing for the relationships within the corporation to generate good fruit. Through this team the relationships with people we spend the difficult moments make them easier to diagnose and resolve (CEO7).

CEO 5 suffered an airplane accident that left him hospitalized for several months. This event was, for him, a milestone in his personal and professional life, because he had to stay away from the work activities. Meanwhile, the corporation began to undergo serious financial problems, called by the interviewee as "the biggest crisis ever lived". It was a very difficult period when many of the directors, coworkers, relatives and employees thought the corporation would have no way out of the crisis. It seemed like the end.

However, for CEO 5 this was just another crisis that he was going through and during which he, as a leader, was better able to show his potential. And for that, he advised to search skilled professionals who could collaborate as a team in this new scenario. As the theory of Relational Leadership emphasizes, this situation is a social process and a relational dynamics, because leadership is seen as a process by which systems change through the constructions of roles and relationships (Fletcher, 2004; Seers, 2004; Uhl-Bien, 2003; 2005). In this moment of crisis experienced by CEO 5 the construction of roles and relationships were changed according to the system needs. Therefore, configuring new relationships.

According to this CEO 5, who has been a professional for over 30 years in the area of health, collective thinking has been gaining strength for those who want to stand out in the labor market "in the past, individualism was much more evident". The medicine doctor held the power and most of the time took decisions alone. Currently this has changed, in the view of CEO 5. Doctors are learning to work as a team and understand each other in difficult times. Thinking and acting collectively makes the odds of going through difficulties least probable. This confirms the theory of Relational Leadership, where the leader can share responsibilities with other people, distributing responsibility in the different kinds of relationships that are built together (Jian & Fairhurst, 2017).

To form a team it is necessary to build trust as seen previously and consequently think of collectively. That is, individuals who occupy a leadership position need to encourage people to think about the group, showing that the activity that is developed by each (individually) will help the team. These excerpts of speeches are a representation of the collective as in the relational leadership theory (Uhl-Bien, 2003; 2005):

Imagine you have your whole team making efforts for the corporation to go well. People delivering all the potential they must give. The corporation achieves as much performance as possible. How can the corporation achieve the maximum possible performance? To the extent that all people in the organization are committed to giving as much of their potential as possible (CEO 7).

How can you not impose your own ideas all the time? How can we know how to value what comes from the collective, from a group? This requires a lot of patience, a lot of detachment, knowing how to deal with different personalities. Sometimes it requires you to think that that solution is not the best but it was the solution that that group or that person found (CEO 6).

These speeches depict that forming people committed to a team helps in the performance of the organization. That leaders need to know how to look at each individual, expressed as 'entity' by Uhl-Bien (2006) as well as at the team as a collective. CEO 1 portrays the importance of understanding these entities. However, it says that understanding the entities is to be able to confess that everyone has a profile:

I ended up everywhere I went as an executive and today I am sure of one thing: people (pretend that they) do not have strengths and weaknesses and (pretend that they) have no strengths and points to develop [...] So it's a euphemism. People have a profile. I think it's a lot more respectful and I think it's a truth, people have a profile (CEO 1).

Through this thought, the interviewee believes that it is easier to understand the capacities and limitations of their followers and that they are part of the profile of each one. In this way, it is necessary to see that individuals are part of a team and that, by recognizing the profile of each one, the collective thinking is promoted. The CEO 1 exemplifies:

An employee enters my room and says, 'Oh, we're going to fire Zezinho. Why is that? Oh, the guy is too slow, we want to buy dollars, sell dollars, and he keeps thinking, he thinks you can buy, because he could sell, because suddenly it will fall, will rise. No way, just fire him'. Instead, I put him in financial planning. The guy was a success, he was making a career in the United States afterwards. I wonder what I would have done with that guy's life if I got to him and 'Dude, you can't stay, you're a loser. Go away'. He had no problem, he just had a different profile [...] he would undoubtedly work better in a group with people of his same profile, more analytical, to deepen, to enter into the details and not impulsive and quick reasoning (CEO 1).

In another example, cited by CEO 4, at the time of an economic and political crisis, also highlights the importance of the team:

We are experiencing a crisis that, perhaps, is one of the most severe crisis we have already faced here [...] and undoubtedly affects companies. [...] I think, in every crisis, you can never fade. You must try to interpret the crisis and see where we're going. Extrapolate over the median. That's what you have to do. [...]. The team is critical because it helps to interpret the crisis. Working with this team you have much more ability to compete, win and face the problems [...]. So, if I find that today it is possible to enumerate a cause for the organization to be in the (good) position it is now, facing all crisis, the cause is the team (CEO 4).

According to CEO 4, at a certain occasion, Brazil was going through a delicate moment in politics and economics that reflected badly in the sector in which he operated (engineering, civil building). Fewer funding opportunities for housing financing, sharp increase of unemployment, higher interest and the investment market in turmoil. Given this scenario, it was believed that if the organization had no leadership to strengthen the bonds of trust of the entire team in a moment of such a crisis, it would have great difficulty to manage the situation. When the leaders managed to build a team committed to the organization to face these moments of crisis successfully, especially those caused by external factors, the leaders demonstrated the characteristics of the Relational Leadership: trust and commitment (Uhl-Bien, 2006; D'Ávila et al., 2020; Silva, Filippim & Sant'Anna, 2020; Mendes, Sant'Anna & Diniz, 2021).

About another former political and economic crisis in Brazil, CEO 2 complements:

During this crisis from 2015 I was as head of the business, and as a leader one needs to think as a group. Things have been made a lot in group, we have always solved everything together [...] There is a kind of happiness of being always working in group, so decisions are taken in group, which shares responsibility and turns a crisis into something a little lighter (CEO 2).

Therefore, it is observed that, in the face of an economic and political crisis, practicing a leadership that stimulates the collective behavior helps to divide the responsibility, sharing managerial power, so that everyone can get involved and contribute to the new context of the organization. Thus, by promoting a relationship of trust based on the example, together with the ability to form a team through collective thinking, we make the passage to decision-making – that are crucial moments experienced by the CEOs of organizations during moments of crisis.

#### **4.3 Taking decisions: the importance of communication to challenge the loneliness of power**

Given the crisis mentioned by the interviewees, the task of taking decisions is the most important (Uhl-Bien, 2003; 2005; 2006; Akram et al., 2016). It is the choice of the path that the corporation will follow. The research showed

that most of the CEOs believe that their greatest enemy to take good decisions can be the high level of power attached to the position they occupy in the organization. At the summit of a corporation it is common to be left alone by subordinates either too afraid to intrude or out of too much respect, if the CEO does not show openness. When the CEO lets prevail individualism instead of collectivism, the loneliness of power knocks at his door. This loneliness of power is cited by the CEOs as the greatest enemy of leadership, both to succeed and to face crisis situations:

You have to try to interpret the crisis and see where we're going. Extrapolate over the median [...]. That's what you have to do and for that I always want to leave the door of my room open to people criticize me. And I think the loneliness of power is a terrible business. A lot of people fall for that trick. You do nonsense without knowing you're doing nonsense. You must leave the door open, people have to sit there and criticize you. You're going to drink from people (CEO 4).

CEO 4 represents well the thought of how other CEOs also think about the importance of communication and collectivism in the life of a leader. Similarly, the CEO 9 completes:

[...] The corporation was born of relationships... So, every time we assume more commitment, transparency, dialogue with society, new markets, openness of capital, detailing of socio-environmental indicators, in addition to economic commitments, we assume public commitment. So, it's a process of building, changes, learning and relationships (CEO 9).

Such thought does not match with individualism. Loneliness of power can arise if the CEOs do not know how to wisely use this same high degree of power to foster a human resources policy of open doors in all the organization. Several CEOs talked about "leaving the door open", that is to allow people to have free access to enter and exit, to break barriers and overcome the idea of the leader's deification. This is an opportunity to demystify the deified, distant, unattainable image of leadership, demonstrating that a leader is "people like others". Communication becomes the main tool to face a crisis as a way of understanding how people think regardless the level they occupy. Therefore, understanding the entire context composed of different individual perspectives can be much more useful in meeting the most appropriate solutions. This tool is also employed in Relational theory as one of the main characteristics to prevail the multilateral relationship in organizations (Dachler, 1992; Hosking, 1988; Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2014).

In addition to highlighting the importance of communication, humility was also constantly cited by the interviewed CEOs:

You must always be attentive... this dose of humility, of listening to the other. Also, it is good to come out of the structures, think outside the box, have contact with who really matters. It could be the customer in the street or

the employee in the factory. This also helps the leadership to take decisions in times of crisis (CEO9).

I definitely prefer this path, that of simplicity. Because they are bounded to their own beliefs, values. I have always been much more on the side of humility, of not going over anyone, I face this very spontaneously. Not everyone is like that (CEO 2).

There's no one better than anyone else. A woman from Goiás and a woman from Minas Gerais could only succeed due to simplicity. There's no way we can be any different. Money doesn't take away from us our way, our values, the way we were created, humility, which I think can make people have different opportunities. (CEO 10).

It is believed that both good communication and the exercise of humility walk together in the trajectory of good leadership and become an antidote for possible distortions of power, corroborating the perspective of Fairhurst and Connaughton (2014) that emphasizes communication as one of the powerful tools of relational leadership.

After all, providing space for multilateral dialogue inside and outside the organization (so dear to relational leadership) is to know how to listen, to share, to learn, to teach, to contribute. For that the leader needs to have a good dose of humility to brake the iron doors of the organizational hierarchy and doing so to deal better with the loneliness of power. It helps to understand that relationships are fundamental to the growth of the organization and of the highest ranking leadership itself, as well as to face the moments of crisis. The following speech portrays the importance of humility as a healthy way of dealing with the loneliness of power:

Then I learned one thing: In a moment of crisis it is necessary for us to slow down so that everyone grows up. We have to be humble and know the time to let the other grow up; make room for the other is fundamental. This makes all the difference during crisis. [...] The communication process is a grandiose tool, that's what the world needs most, and that's one of the greatest secrets of our growth in facing organizational and economic crisis... we need to share what we learn with everyone and teach people how to communicate, how to create communication tools (CEO 10).

It is noticed that, when the organization has a leader who cares about internal and external relationships as it seems to be the case of these interviewed CEOs, it tends to develop and encourage other leaders to do the same. This is due to the building of trust that is the result of coherent and positive attitudes and behaviors. Such trust promotes shared responsibility, coherence between discourse and practice, building of teams that care about the collective, the creation of spaces for communication among all with transparency and the sharing of ideas and solutions always with a pint of humility. These are the fundamentals of the Relational Leadership (Uhl-Bien, 2003; 2005; 2006; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014; Kurucz et al., 2017; Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018).

## 5 CONCLUSION

The successful CEOs interviewed in this study, who has been leading corporations operating in Brazil during the last three to four decades, perceived the strong positive influence of Relational Leadership to face crisis. The research showed common aspects that meet elements of the Relational Leadership theory: 1) There is an evident appreciation of the multilateral relationship. That is, the involvement of leaders with all areas and people inside the organizations as well as with the various external relationships (suppliers, customers, shareholders, third-party companies and partners and other stakeholders). 2) Such leaders consider that, in order to maintain a multilateral relationship, it is needed to understand that organizations are formed by different people. New interdependent connections are building up and changing over time according to the different situations in which they are connecting themselves resulting in a human social construction. 3) The configuration of relationships is based on trust, conquered by giving the example, in collective thinking and fluid communication with all people (independent of hierarchy) to take decisions. This makes people believe in the corporation's potential and leadership to overcome any crisis. 4) The ability to identify in each person their virtues and limitations retain talents and form a team that always thinks collectively (here the importance of the collective dimension). 5) Communication becomes a decisive tool for leaders to have greater discernment and make decisions in moments of crisis. It is by multilateral dialogue that the CEOs obtain the necessary information that helps them to see the problems and find the solutions.

The category "loneliness of power" emerged from the field of research. This category was not found in studies about the challenges to the Relational Leadership practices. This study contributes to the literature also when it shows a challenge to the practice of the Relational Leadership specially relating to a top position as it is with CEOs. Power carries a burden of responsibility. If well used ennobles the action of leadership and of all the people with which it relates. On the other hand, if misguided, power becomes perverse and harmful. In this way, it can become the main enemy of an individual in a leadership position, especially in moments of crisis. It is in times of crisis that leaders can and should use communication even more to gain an overview of the context and seek help from others. On the other hand, the loneliness of power reveals itself to those leaders who believe that, because they are in a position of leadership and occupy a place of great power, they can solve all problems alone and are able to face crisis and make decisions without effective communication.

The loneliness of power hinders communication and, consequently, the relationship between people, in addition to hindering teamwork, which is at the heart of relational leadership. In societies that inherited a more authoritarian culture, where power distance is greater, this loneliness of power of the CEO or any other leader who occupies a

strategic position in an organization tends to be even greater, becoming an even more serious challenge to relational leadership.

The research revealed that the CEOs see the Relational Leadership as fundamental to face the different crisis they lived throughout their long professional trajectories. To face any kind of crisis they have faced either on a macro economic, political or social level or on a micro individual level, without or within the organization, the secret rests in knowing how to relate to all people (from inside and outside the organization, teams, individuals) in a responsible and coherent way. This is paramount for organizations seeking to survive in the competitive market especially when leaders establish bonds of trust that originate from the example. Hence, creating spaces for dialogue and for all other forms of communication is a crucial way to understand and broaden the vision of the top managers to face and even innovating.

Relationship is not something one can buy. It is a permanent building, which involves several actors. The task and the possible success of the leader is in establishing relationships that positively influence an organization. In general, everyone interviewed showed the sensitivity to identify people, build good relationships, form good teams and communicate well. For this to happen, who knows, the great leaders must be afraid of the loneliness of power.

Finally, it is necessary to point out some limits of this research. One of the limitations is that the interviews were carried out only with very high ranked leaders, that is, from a single perspective. Listening to followers and other involved agents, as the Relational Theory proposes could be a way to compare perceptions and the effect of this leadership on others.

The research findings encourage further studies to be carried out. It is suggested, firstly, an in-depth look at the emerging category loneliness of power, seeking to understand the paradoxes of exercising relational leadership based on social connections and the isolation felt by executives when they reach the top of organizations. Another point arising from the limitation of the study would be capturing the perspective of agents other than executives, such as those led and other stakeholders. Furthermore, as relational leadership implies considering the impact of organizations' contexts (internal and external) on the exercise of leadership, new studies that investigate such influence in depth could be interesting research paths. Finally, studies on the relational approach are mostly based on theoretical discussions and qualitative research. Therefore, there is a lack of instruments capable of measuring and providing more objective data on the dimensions that make up relational leadership.

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