Community engagement through responsible leadership in managing pandemic: insight from India using netnography

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper was to examine how community engagement can be influenced by responsible leadership during crises. It looks at the phenomenon of community engagement and responsible leadership in India during the Covid-19 pandemic, using the collective responses of community.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper uses netnography, which studies community interpretations through their online social communication. The perceptions on how engaged the Indian community felt during the pandemic were studied by collecting and analysing their postings on social media.

Findings – The findings suggest that responsible leadership – through the building of trust, open communication, collective consciousness and mindful action – is an effective way to positively engage stakeholders and influence community response during a pandemic.

Originality/value – This paper contributes to the literature of responsible leadership and community engagement during crises. It is an attempt to link public leadership with responsible leadership and its impact on community engagement in a novel way, filling a void in the literature.

Keywords Community engagement, Responsible leadership, Pandemic, Covid-19, Netnography

1. Introduction

From its origins in Wuhan mere months ago, the coronavirus, Covid-19, has literally travelled around the world, including India (BBC, 2020). India is a densely populated country of 1.339 billion people (Census, 2011). It has the world’s second highest population, and millions of its people live in villages and slums. Pre-pandemic, the country was already facing challenges in health and medical infrastructure; for example, the 2011 Census showed only 0.55 hospital beds per 1,000 people (Census, 2011). Given its demographic challenges, India does not have the capacity to deal with a pandemic and had every likelihood of being severely affected by Covid-19. However, to date, the country has had a comparatively small number of deaths. At the end of April, for example, it was reported that while the death rate in New York doubled within two to three days, in India over a nine-day period the death rate was less than double (BBC, 2020). Hence, India has been trying to tackle the pandemic and slow down death rates.

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through good leadership and an engaged community. This paper examines how community engagement can be influenced by responsible leadership during a crisis.

Community engagement is a social process, whereby vulnerable groups collaborate for common needs (Newport and Jawahar, 2003). Community engagement is crucial in achieving high quality, collaborative care during a crisis (Gaventa and Barrett, 2012). For example, during the Covid-19 pandemic, the community’s collective actions, such as strictly following lockdown measures, wearing masks and obeying other necessary procedures, were critical to prevent the transmission of infection (Yang and Ren, 2020). This behaviour preference depended on individual choices influenced by government policy, public communication and social norms (Ramsbottom et al., 2018). We argue that government policy by itself is not adequate but needs to be implemented effectively through communication and leadership. This reflects the proverb “cometh the hour, cometh the man”: a leader has to come to the fore during a critical time, as did Winston Churchill during World War II. A good leader can use personal influence, transform policy and improve governance at the bottom level. We propose that at a time of crisis, responsible leadership is required—not a simple relationship between leader and followers but, as Maak and Pless (2006b, p. 5) define it, “the art of building and sustaining morally sound relationships with all stakeholders of an organization”. We believe that responsible leadership during crises will effectively engage a variety of stakeholders and influence community responses positively. This area is under-researched as there is lack of clarity on exactly how responsible leadership can be applied to public leadership as opposed to organisational leadership, particularly during a time of crisis. In order to fill this research gap, and to contribute to a new strand of literature, we examine the phenomenon of community engagement and responsible leadership in India during the Covid-19 pandemic. To achieve this, we use netnography to study the perceptions of Indian community through their postings on social media, on how engaged they felt during the pandemic under the prime minister’s leadership. The paper begins with a review of the literature on community engagement, responsible leadership and crises in general, and provides a brief summary of the context of the pandemic in India. The second part of the paper discusses netnography as the preferred method for this study. The findings are then presented with themes derived from thematic analysis, followed by discussion and conclusion. The paper will contribute to the literature by offering insight into how responsible leadership can be used as a tool for community engagement during crises.

2. Literature review

2.1 Community engagement

Community is the most important foundation of modern society (Putnam, 2001), and is defined as “a group of actors who, while not necessarily sharing common geographic space, nevertheless act together for common goals” (Ojha et al., 2016, p. 275). The authors contend that community engagement is the cooperation and exchange of a reciprocally beneficial transfer of knowledge and resources for a common good. The assertion that community engagement is critical in attaining democratic goals has long existed in development studies. For example, Diaz-Cayeros et al. (2014) found that community engagement helped the traditional governance system in Mexico, resulting in the better distribution of public goods. Thus, community engagement makes a difference to the governance system (Gaventa and Barrett, 2012).

As with a nation’s governance system and development, community engagement is very crucial during crises. This idea is not new; for example, the importance of community volunteering during World War II is well recognised (Chen et al., 2006). At a broader level, the main objective of community engagement during a crisis is to transform a high-risk community into a highly disaster-resilient community. The research suggests that a collaborative response among community, institutions and government will result in better
preparedness and recovery during crises (e.g. Ramsbottom et al., 2018). O’Mara-Eves et al. (2013) emphasised that at a time of crisis the attainment of socio-political goals by asking communities to take control of their own destiny is more effective for utilitarian reasons. A few studies have linked community engagement to health crises. For example, Schoch-Spana et al. (2007) found that cumulative actions, such as mutual problem solving and collaborative action with formal authorities, can augment efforts initiated by government to mitigate a national crisis. Similarly, Ahmed et al. (2017) mentioned that effective community engagement requires support from the respective administrative and infrastructure setups. This reflects the importance of appropriate leadership and administration to engage the community for a social cause.

2.2 Responsible leadership
There is growing debate on what leadership style is most appropriate to address pertinent challenges (Pless and Maak, 2011). Based on organisation studies, scholars have found a range of theories – such as transformational, authentic, ethical, servant and participative leadership (Alvesson and Einola, 2019). According to Waldman and Galvin (2008), “not to be responsible, is not to be effective as a leader” (p. 327); however, the notion of responsibility was missing from earlier established theories. Responsible leadership is different from traditional, dyadic leader–follower relationships as it focuses on relational and moral actions to engage stakeholders (Maak, 2007). It is about “building and cultivating . . . ethically sound relations toward different stakeholders . . . in an interconnected stakeholder society” (Maak and Pless, 2006a, p. 101). Responsible leaders should possess accountability and trust when working with stakeholders such as employees, customers and shareholders (Marques et al., 2018). We follow the concept that, in order to maintain trust and sustainable relationships with stakeholders, leaders need both emotional and ethical qualities (Maak and Pless, 2006a), which is termed “relational intelligence” (Pless and Maak, 2005). It suggests that while interacting with different stakeholders, responsible leaders require emotional intelligence to understand the need for and value of people from various backgrounds and engage them for a common end. Similarly, the responsible leader requires ethical intelligence to cope with emerging conflicts of interest and ethical dilemmas, acting according to humane and moral values (Pless and Maak, 2005).

While research on responsible leadership in organisations has proliferated over past decades (Marques et al., 2018), specific attention to leadership in political or public realms remains rare. This is particularly important because “a society of markets, laws, and elections is not enough if the rich and powerful fail to behave with respect, honesty, and compassion towards the rest of society . . .” (Sachs, 2011, p. 3). We argue that responsible leadership is equally crucial for public leaders. The public leadership literature differentiates political leadership from administrative leadership; the focus of this paper is on the former. Hence, we use the term public leadership to describe the roles of a political or public leader in serving and guiding the community. Others define public leadership in a more meaningful way, as a form of collective leadership in which various public bodies work together to achieve the common goal of promoting public values and sustained well-being (Brookes and Grint, 2010). Public leadership is aspirational, contextual and complicated, whereby politicians are meant to exhibit the skills and outcomes of a leader (Boin et al., 2005). Public leadership views politicians as transformational leaders and bureaucrats as transactional managers (Althaus and Wanna, 2008); however, to date, responsible leadership is absent in the debate. There are some rare connections between ethical leadership and public leaders (e.g. Lasthuizen et al., 2019), but to our knowledge no attempt has been made to link responsible leadership with political leaders, who have the highest level of responsibility. We aim to help fill this void by aligning public leadership with responsible leadership.
2.3 Community engagement through responsible leadership during crisis

During crises, a community experiences threats and uncertainty, which necessitates urgent leadership (Rosenthal et al., 2001). In a traumatic situation a community expects its public leaders to take charge and solve the issue by fronting up and exercising responsibility and accountability (Ansell et al., 2014). Based on the literature review, we suggest that to promote community engagement during a crisis, a public leader needs to follow certain guidelines. First, leaders must sense the danger and use prompt and intuitive decisions to organise infrastructure and procedures once the crisis has hit. To avoid controversy, the initial message should be delivered promptly (Boin et al., 2005). Further, the detail and method of the initial message is more crucial than the actual action (Helsloot and Groenendaal, 2017). This provides a credible explanation of the crisis, offers guidance and hope, and suggests the situation is under control. If a leader does not follow this approach, there is a chance of losing the confidence of the public. Hence, the very first and difficult task to initiate community engagement is to obtain the public’s trust, which can be achieved through responsible leadership (Marques et al., 2018).

Second, during the stage of actual action leaders need to make prompt decisions, using less information and more intuition (Helsloot and Groenendaal, 2017). The research suggests that during a crisis, the public leader will require task-oriented leadership accompanied by people-oriented and organisation-oriented leadership (Kapucu and Ustunb, 2018). They need to judge how much to pursue cooperation among the community and how much command and control to use to promote community engagement during an emergency (Ansell et al., 2014). Third, communication should be clear, so that the community does not experience ambiguity. According to Boin et al. (2005), leaders should present factual information and avoid “sugar coating”. Although it is commonly believed that the public will panic in times of emergency, leaders should be transparent and open about the issue, and allow people to be aware of the uncertainty that exists, to improve credibility and engagement (Helsloot and Groenendaal, 2017). Fourth, people want a leader with compassion, and with positivity that the crisis is manageable. In this way, if the leader can help to reduce stress, the community will follow the leader, be engaged in the decision and endorse the leadership, but if the crisis fails to dissipate, leaders will have to face the blame (Boin and Hart, 2003). Any mistake, either in decision making or communication may lead to inappropriate crisis management, resulting in loss of life and property (Murphy and Dunn, 2012).

Finally, leadership plays a key role in engaging communities in government plans and decisions during the crisis (Nyenswah et al., 2016). Leaders need to have more of a soft leadership power (Peyton et al., 2019). Merely doing the right thing is not adequate during a crisis; it is more important to clarify the situation and involve people in decision making and implementation (Boin et al., 2005). This is because crisis preparation and response will not be activated without the contribution of susceptible communities (Linnell, 2013). For example, in past epidemics volunteers have facilitated mass vaccination movements, nursed homebound patients and supplied essentials to the needy (Diaz-Cayeros et al., 2014). Successful community engagement in a crisis can be achieved by getting the top-down support of public leaders who understand the intricacies of community engagement (Schoch-Spana et al., 2007).

The extant literature suggests many ways a public leader can mitigate a crisis and restore normality. We propose that a system or policy alone is not enough to inspire and engage a community, but that responsible leadership is required to involve people collectively for a common end. In the extant literature, there is no clear connection between community engagement and responsible leadership during crises, although aforementioned actions such as evolving trust, communicating with stakeholders and engaging them in action and compassion, appear to be attributes of responsible leadership. In this paper, we aim to examine this connection, using the case of the Covid-19 pandemic response in India.
2.4 The context of India

The Indian Government confirmed India’s first case of coronavirus infection on 30 January 2020. On 19 March, Prime Minister Modi urged all citizens to observe the “Janata curfew”, a self-imposed curfew from 22 March, as the number of cases had reached almost 500 (Economic Times, 2020). His announcement was heavily followed on social media, and 1.3 billion people, at the behest of the prime minister and feeling patriotic, observed a strict, one-day, self-imposed curfew (BBC, 2020). During this time the prime minister constantly took into consideration the opinions of all stakeholders, including the media, doctors and health and support staff, to develop strategies for the next step (BBC, 2020). The experiment of the self-imposed curfew acclimatised people to prepare voluntarily for the subsequent compulsory lockdown (Economic Times, 2020).

At the end of the curfew, Prime Minister Modi stated that the “Janata curfew is just the beginning of a long battle against COVID-19”. Then, on 24 March, he urged a nationwide lockdown for 21 days to control the spread of coronavirus, one of the strictest lockdown measures in the world (BBC, 2020), resulting in slow growth of infections. End of this period, the prime minister extended the lockdown until 3 May, with some conditional relaxations. It was found that the precautions depended not only on the lockdown itself, but also on the collective actions of community. Hence, upon the announcement and throughout the implementation of the lockdown, Mr Modi asked people to supply food and other necessary items to at least one poor family during lockdown. His requests were accepted and upheld by the Indian people at large. Community leaders helped the police to convince communities to follow lockdown strictly, many people donated food to the needy, millions of dollars were donated to the prime minister’s relief fund to help the government meet health and medical requirements (Forbes, 2020). Furthermore, celebrities campaigned for the importance of staying home and religious organisations provided donations to the government and raised awareness among their followers. Similarly, Mr Modi inspired employers to not deduct the pay of employees working in any capacity and urged them to not lay staff off. This did not happen in all cases as many private firms had no idea how they would meet their expenses if they continued to pay staff salaries.

This situation created many issues. For example, thousands of people lost their jobs. Migrant workers particularly were vulnerable, without the means to survive in cities during the lockdown (BBC India, 2020). With restrictions on transport due to the lockdown, many had to walk hundreds of miles to reach their homes. After a period of chaos, the government tried to help by organising hundreds of special trains to move them. Mr Modi appealed to people to help wherever possible, and this was well received by the community. Many known personalities came forward to feed migrant workers and help them get home; for example, a Bollywood celebrity Mr Sonu Sood rescued thousands with the help of his team (IndiaTV, 2020). Similarly, Mr Vikas Khanna, a well-known chef, started a community kitchen during lockdown and fed around 10 million meals in 125 cities and towns around India with a successful social media drive (IndiaTV, 2020). These examples show how the prime minister’s request galvanised the community into becoming actively involved in solving societal issues. Such an active and engaged community helped the Indian Government immensely as they had their own challenges and limitations in managing the wellbeing of a large population during this crisis. We need, however, to analyse how engaged the community felt with the vision and actions of the leader. Hence, the research question is: how does community engagement through responsible leadership help during a pandemic?

3. Methods

The study uses the netnography method, a qualitative research methodology for online research familiarised by Kozinets (1997) to undertake marketing research. It uses ethnography to study communities through their social communications online (Kozinets,
Netnography is faster and more affordable than traditional ethnography, and also more naturalistic and unobtrusive (Heinonen and Medberg, 2018). Netnography provides researchers with a window into naturally occurring behaviours and allows continuing access to informants in a particular online social situation (Kozinets et al., 2015). In using netnography, the authors were aware that although its reach to respondents is wider and deeper compared to traditional ethnography, engaging with active online users has some fundamental sampling biases (Lugosi et al., 2012). For example, in this study we could not include the perceptions of those in the community who do not use social media. However, this method is considered the most suitable for this research, given the social distancing imposed by the ongoing pandemic. Also, netnography was the best fit to receive natural responses from communities regarding the pandemic and public leadership. We collected the responses of Indian citizens through their online postings during the pandemic (Heinonen and Medberg, 2018). The review of the literature suggests that scholars have used netnography differently. Some have followed all the steps of the netnographic method, from research planning to research presentations (e.g. Lima et al., 2014), while others have either espoused netnographic procedures or excluded a particular step to accommodate their specific research (e.g. Bratucu et al., 2014).

In this study we have followed the former version, using all the steps; namely, research planning, entrée, collection of data, analysis of data, consideration of ethical standards and research presentation (Kozinets, 2002). In planning of research, we conducted a systematic literature review and evaluated research questions. Entrée means identifying appropriate online communities; we used postings on Facebook, Yahoo and other online forum discussions for a wider response scope. For data collection, Kozinets (2010) proposed purposive sampling, which for much existing research meant concentrating on a single online community (e.g. Xun and Raynolds, 2010). We, however, chose the generalised approach of convenient sampling suggested by Costello et al. (2017), as community engagement during a pandemic affects the community at large rather than targeting a particular stratum. We considered ethical standards and followed the anonymity of the online community both in data analysis and publication (Janta et al., 2012). Data representation is done with the help of thematic analysis. For this research, we further refined our approach to netnography and focused on humanist netnography, concentrating on research questions with deep social import or social change (Kozinets et al., 2015). Comments relating to different leadership, pandemic and community engagement were collected. This is considered “extant” material which is created independently without any interventions on social media platforms. Data collection consisted of gathering comments posted on these platforms. This was unobtrusive as the authors of this study did not have direct contact with those who posted the comments. We collected 5,000 comments anonymously over 60 days during the pandemic. The authors read all the comments and irrelevant comments discarded. Irrelevant comments are those that do not directly attribute to the research questions. Of the 5,000 gathered posts, 2,124 comments were found through raw peeling and data debris cleaning. This served as our dataset, on which we conducted thematic analysis (Nowell et al., 2017). The entire task was carried out manually, and deductive codes were generated based on the threads and comments. We understand that laborious thematic analysis results in insightful findings (Braun and Clarke, 2006). We grouped together similar codes, which resulted in five major themes, as discussed in the following section.

4. Findings
Based on the comments from the various online platforms, the following major themes emerged.
4.1 Lead from the front
Findings reflect that people felt connected to Prime Minister Modi’s leadership during the pandemic. Modi emerged as a responsible leader through his skill of leading from the front and connecting with the masses. He appealed to the nation to observe social distancing and made a difficult decision to impose a strict lockdown, persuading people to stay at home. He also planned for the economic impact this action would engender and implemented the lockdown humanely and sensitively. People welcomed the decision; for example, a person posted: “In right time in right way you have to take good decisions. We are very grateful and proud of our prime minister”. A number of comments reflect that people believed Prime Minister Modi showed exceptional leadership in mobilising these decisions, and in turn they offered their trust and confidence. For example, one comment states: “The preventive measures as suggested by Modiji is perfect in all respects and will be observed for sure by us”. Many posts revealed that because the prime minister was working hard and collaborating with state ministers, global leaders, chief health officers and even the community, they felt confident and motivated to fight the virus. For example, “We are with you. We are inspiring our students and friends to follow the guidelines issued by you. We shall overcome this situation with determination”. Some posts note that the prime minister started wearing homemade masks during press conferences and observing social distancing at all meetings, before asking the people to follow this example, motivated them to follow him. This is reflected in a comment that said, “You have guided to us in right way by walking the talk”.

4.2 Collective consciousness
Findings strongly suggested that Modi cleverly used collective consciousness during the pandemic through a set of shared ideas, actions and moral attitudes, which worked as a unifying force to combat the pandemic by channelling community engagement. The appeal of the prime minister demonstrated that he was passionate about the “Janata curfew”, as well as for all rounds of lockdown. This helped coordinate the community towards a common end and the community supported the government’s efforts; “We stand by our PM in this critical time and will observe lockdown like a war and will fight to sustain all humanity”. To boost the morale of the people locked in their homes and those on the frontline, health experts and police, the prime minister urged people to undertake small gestures, such as clapping hands, ringing bells and the lighting lamps. This was a huge success as the posters mentioned that this helped them to create a bond with each other. “When we turned off all the lights of home and had diya (candles) in all the directions, we experienced the superpower, illuminating the common purpose we are all fighting for”. Comments reflected that this was an historic event where individuals from all social strata shared the gestures. Some posts, however, questioned the slow response of the government in protecting frontline health experts and police from the abuse of people in certain communities who resisted Covid-19 testing. Others noted the overwhelming response to Modi’s passionate appeal to help the poor; for example, “Our society is making 2000 roties (bread) and curry every day to feed the needy, thanks Modiji for inspiration for this selfless task”. Similarly, social media reflected that people appreciated the prime minister’s call to donate to the PM Cares Fund, which resulted in many generous contributions. For example, “Modiji, you are truly inspiration to my kids, they donated their birthday gift amount to PM Care Funds”.

4.3 Constant communication
Another key theme emerging from social media was the continuous and reliable communication to provide the information necessary to avoid panic. Posters mentioned they appreciated Prime Minister Modi’s efforts for clear, transparent and regular communication. It seems the community felt engaged because of the continuous appearances of the prime minister on various media platforms, asking for cooperation
from the community to combat the battle and thanking citizens for their discipline during lockdown. For example, one comment said: “It has always been a happy feeling seeing him (PM) on the TV screen guiding us, he is among the very rarest leaders who is fully dedicated to the nation. Let us hear him on the TV and obey him seriously”. The prime minister used social media very clearly to talk to the community. People found his posts, assuring them the government was working overtime to deal with the crisis, clear and straightforward. We found that people heavily shared the prime minister’s message through their social media channels. However, some comments show that some people’s expectations with regard to clear communication were not met; for example, “What is next step to defeat CoronaVirus? When is Mr. Modi going to tell us? Please update public”. The prime minister’s interactions with “corona warriors” – cleaning and medical staff, working constantly for their country – were also very well received by the community. The prime minister successfully urged celebrities, both Bollywood and sports, to join together to spread awareness of washing hands, improving immunity, taking care of elders at home and staying home. Central and state government employees joined the drive and started posting their own videos to raise awareness of the importance of lockdown and following policies strictly. People also appreciated the Modi’s call for telecom companies to play a 30-s coronavirus information alert at the beginning of every phone call. Findings suggest that clear, honest and continuous communication was key to promoting community participation and raising awareness. “We have utmost respect for our Prime Minister Modiji. We all do feel safe and secure as you are taking care of everything. We appreciate everything you and your team are doing.” Comments also mentioned that people felt engaged because they were heard.

4.4 Compassion and empathy
Those who commented on social media consistently praised Prime Minister Modi’s leadership, stressing that humanity, and not the economy, had to be kept central while solving the pandemic crisis. For example, messages such as “Jaan hai to Jahaan hai”, which means if there is life there is world. Social media discussed this lesson continuously that the PM prefers lives over economy. Comments reveal that how Modi engaged the community in clarifying what should be priority during the crisis; for example, “We appreciate your suggestions and care and so are following it like “Laxman Rekha” (strict rule) to protect ourselves and others from Corona virus.” Further, the comments reflect that people were convinced by the prime minister’s messages when he emphasised that the economy would be back on track but not if lives were lost. These messages, prioritising patience and health goals, were reflected in the community posts on social media. For example, “We feel happy now that our PM is alert and conscious of the health and care of the people. Together we could achieve many tasks which would hinder our nation’s growth”. Another area where the community felt engaged was the prime minister’s offer to extend help to SAARC countries, holding a G-20 meeting and exporting much-needed medicines without tax to help other nations. One post mentioned that it was a ‘good call by Modiji along with our neighbour countries’ battle against coronavirus, by offering collaborative efforts for SAARC countries [to] unitedly fight against Corona”. Appreciative comments were also posted on how the prime minister helped thousands of students and citizens stuck in the countries like the UK, USA, China, Italy and the UAE to get back home.

4.5 Action rather than words
The findings show that the Indian community appreciated the way the prime minister managed the crisis in a responsible manner, through his actions rather than promises. One comment note that, “This is the most historic step I have ever seen in my life, but as a responsible citizen I . . . appreciate your very early action otherwise this would have been a huge disaster”. The findings also reflect that people supported actions taken by the
government and were happy to cooperate with the stringent measures with respect to lockdown, such as the screening of travellers at airports, quarantine measures, the distribution of medicines, treatment facilities and travel restrictions, getting citizens back from other countries. For example, “the only leader in the world, who leads with positivity, empathy and power. Best wishes for all timely decisions and supporting actions”. Yet, a few were concerned about the timely actions, for example, “Cases are growing rapidly, we are unable to do tests. No test kits available. Daily minimum 1 lakh tests should be done to stop more cases.” alarming to government to initiate rapid testing to prevent pandemic spread. Most of those who commented welcomed the major relief steps, such as announcing financial packages to transfer relief money to poor people and farmers, extra pensions for handicapped and senior citizens, the movement of migrant workers, food security and financial packages for small and medium firms. This is reflected in a comment, that noted: “Excellent announcements to ease financial stress and ensuring recovery and progress, India will definitely win this battle under the supervision of our PM and the dedicated Medical staff, Police, Army, cleaning staff, communities offering food and shelter to the needy”. Also appreciated was the decision to provide a comprehensive insurance cover for doctors, paramedics and other supporting staff, and evolving such large medical setups promptly across India, as reflected in one comment: “Very good decision. Protection of life of health professionals who are risking their own life to protect life of others is of paramount importance”.

5. Discussion and conclusion
The above section discusses the broader themes of the findings that demonstrate how the community was engaged through responsible leadership and how well they participated collaboratively. For India, a democratic country of 1.33 billion people, getting community unity was a huge challenge.

According to Maak and Pless (2006a), responsible leaders have a strong head start in establishing trusting relationships with key stakeholders. This was evident when Prime Minister Modi led from the front while addressing the nation on the pandemic for the first time. He said confidently: “whenever I have asked support of my countrymen, I was never disappointed. I urge the same in this critical time” (Outlook, 2020). This is in line with the proposition of Boin et al. (2005), which during a crisis the initial message needs to be addressed quickly. Delivery of the message in itself, however, was not enough to generate confidence among the community, but it was delivered in such a way as to create trust among the community, considered the most difficult task during a crisis (Helsloot and Groenendaal, 2017). However, in India community engagement was given a strong head start by gaining the trust of its people, this reflects their belief in the leadership. This made a vibrant democracy of citizens ready for a national lockdown, reflecting the very first step in promoting community engagement.

The prime minister also showcased responsible leadership when he promoted community engagement through an inclusive, coordinated and collective effort to make everyone feel they were together in this fight, irrespective of social status. This finding echoes the proposition of “relational intelligence”, which suggests interacting with people from diverse backgrounds and interests, and engaging them in the same direction (Pless and Maak, 2005). This was the approach adopted by the prime minister, who urged the community to cooperate with each other. Such action is in line with the assertion that every crisis necessitates different types of effort and cooperation from various stakeholders (Kapucu and Ustumb, 2018). Indeed, the challenge during the crisis was to coordinate heterogeneous stakeholders and communities with conflicting objectives to fight for a common cause (Yang and Ren, 2020). The prime minister synchronised all formal institutions, including the state government, media, police and health department, as well as informal groups such as religious
communities and NGOs. This resulted in a united effort to make the lockdown succeed, ensuring the health and safety of and food supply to the needy. As findings suggest, this achievement was possible through meaningful and constant communication with stakeholders as recommended by Barrett (2006). For example, Modi explained the need for a lockdown using a meticulous choice of words and phrases that sounded unmistakably understandable, was impactful for every sane person and reflected the importance of meaning making communication during the crisis (Sellnow and Seeger, 2013). State ministers who in the past might criticise Mr Modi, have been supportive and cooperative during this crisis. Hence, our research confirms that responsible leadership can be more effective in engaging stakeholders (Pless and Maak, 2011).

Apart from collective consciousness, the prime minister’s messages reflected compassion, care and empathy throughout the pandemic, illustrating the significance of a leader’s “relational intelligence” in demonstrating humane and moral values and care for others, and his emotional intelligence in coping with emergencies (Pless and Maak, 2005). He continuously emphasised life before economy, reflecting the quality of responsible and accountable behaviour (Pless and Maak, 2011). Further, during the lockdown extension the prime minister urged people to continue looking after children and elders, help neighbouring poor families and follow strict lockdown guidelines (Business Today, 2020). During this time people in the community were both senders and receivers of information (Sellnow and Seeger, 2013), using the power of social media to spread messages and promote people’s positive actions such as donating food to the poor. This reflects an earlier study that found community participation can improve governance (Diaz-Cayeros et al., 2014). It also shows that empathetic, continuous communication is a key factor in channelling community engagement during a pandemic (Kapucu and Ustunb, 2018). Hence, empathetic communication from a responsible leader can capture the support of the community at large.

The responsible leader may need to change a decision to maximise the use of collaborative power through productive interaction with stakeholders (McGuire and Silvia, 2009). Our findings reveal that the prime minister listened to the community and other leaders to find effective solutions. Responsible leaders have the intellectual capacity to cognitively assess complex situations, by listening to different stakeholders and acting according to humane and moral values (Maak and Pless, 2006b). This was illustrated in our findings as after community feedback on the situation of migrant labourers, special trains were organised to move millions of workers to their homes (BBC, 2020). Farmers also suffered, as their crops were harvested but could not be taken to market; later, decisions were overturned, and farmers were given some relief. In line with the Ansell et al.’s (2014) proposal, the prime minister has balanced soft cooperation with command and control during the crisis. There have been cases when the community lost the patience to remain at home, resulting in clashes between police and the general community. When soft cooperation failed, police applied law and order to regulate the lockdown, even though this action was criticised.

The above discussion shows that the responsible leadership of the prime minister helped to organise collaborative efforts and promote community engagement. According to the Indian Council of Medical Research, if the community had not cooperated in a strict lockdown, the situation in India would have been far worse (ICMR, 2020).

To sum up, the aim of our research was to understand how community engagement can be effective using responsible leadership during a pandemic. Using netnography, we collected data from Indian social media postings, which reflected the perceptions of the community towards the leadership of Prime Minister Modi during the Covid-19 pandemic. We found that as with business leaders, public leaders encounter moral complexity due to the many stakeholder claims, including community, which require a responsible response. The results confirm that responsible public leadership is a social-relational and ethical phenomenon (Maak and Pless, 2006a), which can be achieved through “relational intelligence”,

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collaborating with stakeholders during crises (Pless and Maak, 2005). In the case of India, the most challenging aspect of responsible leadership was to win the trust of the community and influence its engagement. This was made possible by continuous open communication, responsible leadership, the involvement of all stakeholders and prompt decision-making. Overall, we found that during this crisis responsible leadership worked through continuous communication, trust, transparency and active community engagement.

References


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