



An examination of the role of leadership in fostering employee engagement: A case study of the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal

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ABSTRACT

Purpose of the study: This study investigated the role of leadership in fostering employee engagement during times of crises in the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa.

Design/methodology/approach: Using a qualitative approach within the interpretivist tradition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with eleven leaders across executive, senior, and middle management levels in a property management company.

Findings: The findings revealed that these crises caused severe economic disruption to the commercial property sector, with small businesses being the most affected. The study found that leaders faced considerable challenges in balancing business continuity with employee wellbeing while managing increased workloads and remote working arrangements. It was discovered that effective crisis leadership requires a foundation of strong employee relationships, transparent communication, and collaborative approaches. The role of leadership to foster engagement during crises emerged from the thematic analysis of the data collected. These included the need for a leader to demonstrate both decisiveness and empathy, while encouraging team resilience through empowerment and support.

Recommendations/value: The research contributes to understanding how leadership practices influence employee engagement during unprecedented crises and provides insights for developing more resilient



organisational leadership approaches. The findings suggest that organisational survival during crises depends significantly on leaders' ability to maintain employee engagement through compassionate leadership, clear communication, and adaptive management strategies.

Managerial implications: Given the significance of small businesses and that of the commercial property sector in general to the economy, together with the interrelationship of leadership and employee engagement and that of employee engagement and organisational performance, this study attempts to offer leaders strategies to improve leadership during crises.

Keywords: Crises; commercial property sector; disruption; engagement; leadership

JEL Classification: M10, M19

1. INTRODUCTION

The commercial property sector in South Africa faced unprecedented leadership challenges during multiple crises between 2020 and 2022 (Matli, 2020; Redda, 2021; Reinwald *et al.*, 2021). While navigating the disruptions caused by the Coronavirus disease (Covid-19) pandemic where established organisational practices and routines were displaced (Collings *et al.*, 2021; Reinwald *et al.*, 2021), leaders were faced with the July 2021 civil unrest that led to widespread damage to commercial properties mainly in KwaZulu-Natal (Vhumbunu, 2021) followed by devastating floods in April 2022 (Mbhele, 2022). These compounding crises demanded rapid leadership responses to maintain business continuity while addressing heightened employee stress and anxiety.

Existing studies reveal that employee engagement has a direct influence on organisational performance (Saks & Gruman, 2014; Yin, 2018; Ahmed *et al.*, 2020; Collings *et al.*, 2021; Reinwald *et al.*, 2021; Kewalramani, 2022). Moreover, while existing scholarship demonstrates the interrelationship between leadership, employee engagement and organisational performance, the role of leadership in fostering employee engagement during times of crises appears to be scant.

This is particularly significant as crises can threaten the organisation's survival (Saji, 2014; Reinwald *et al.*, 2021; Balasubramanian & Fernandes, 2022). In times of crises, particularly those on the scale of the Coronavirus pandemic and the civil unrest experienced in July 2021, the dynamics change. Employees are faced with conflicting priorities, anxiety and fear (Saji, 2014; Lazim *et al.*, 2020; Balasubramanian & Fernandes, 2022). The leaders in the property management company under research had to navigate through uncharted territory to lead their teams through these crises, whilst trying to ensure organisational survival.

The study focused on the commercial property sector due to its significance to South Africa's economy. Moreover, KwaZulu-Natal is the second-largest contributor to the country's gross domestic product (GDP). Before these crises, South Africa's economy was already under strain (Redda, 2021; Matli, 2020). The implementation of lockdown measures to restrict the movement of people and goods in an attempt to curb the spread of the disease brought the economy to a standstill. Non-essential businesses were unable to operate. This resulted in job losses and business closures (Redda, 2021). There was great uncertainty for employers and employees alike (Collings *et al.*, 2021), with organisations having to restructure their operations and implement work-from-home efforts where possible, with very little warning (Matli, 2020).

The situation was exacerbated by civil unrest where thousands descended on shopping centres and warehouses, looting and destroying properties primarily in KwaZulu-Natal and to a lesser extent in Gauteng (Vhumbunu, 2021). In April 2022, heavy rains and flooding caused immense damage to infrastructure, businesses, and homes in KwaZulu-Natal (Mbhele, 2022).

These catastrophic events created complex challenges for organisational leaders. The background presented above essentially points to the overarching research question of the role of leadership in fostering employee engagement during times of crises in the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal.

The research objectives were thus to:

- Explore how the crises affected the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal
- Examine how employee engagement was affected by the crises in the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal; and
- Identify the role that leadership plays in fostering employee engagement during times of crises in the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal.

The next section examines the commercial property sector in the South African economy in general, followed by the contribution to KwaZulu-Natal. The effect of the multiple crises mentioned above on the commercial property sector is explored, and an analysis of existing scholarship on leadership, employee engagement and crises is undertaken.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Definitions and concepts

The following terms and concepts are used throughout the study and are defined next to ensure clarity and provide context.

Employee engagement is when an employee emotionally commits to the success of an organisation, is aligned with the organisation, and feels valued and supported. It is an important contributor to organisational success (Saks & Gruman, 2014).

Leadership refers to the ability of an individual to influence and affect the motivation or competence of other individuals in a group to achieve common objectives. It plays a pivotal role in fostering employee engagement (Grant, 2019).

Crises are events or a series of unanticipated, disruptive events such as the Covid-19 pandemic, the civil unrest in July 2021, and the floods that ravaged KwaZulu-Natal in April 2022. Crises require swift action to mitigate the threat to organisational survival (Saji, 2014).

The *commercial property sector* refers to retail, office, and industrial properties that are rented to business owners for the purpose of making a profit. The key stakeholders are tenants, landlords and managing agents.

- A *managing agent*, in the context of this study, refers to a property management company that serves as the “middleman” between landlords and tenants. The agent is entrusted to manage all aspects of the commercial property in terms of letting, collecting rental, building maintenance, operational and facility management.

2.2 Theoretical foundation

The research was underpinned by the social exchange theory, which recognises the reciprocal nature of workplace relationships (Cherry, 2022), and the employee engagement theory, which links engagement to organisational success (Saks & Gruman, 2014; Grant, 2019).

2.2.1 Overview of empirical studies

The analysis of empirical studies related to the study commences with the South African commercial property sector in terms of its significance to the economy. This is then followed by the contribution of KwaZulu-Natal to the GDP and its significance in the commercial property sector. The analysis serves to justify the choice of the sector and, in particular,

KwaZulu-Natal as the study area. Thereafter, an analysis of existing scholarship on crises, employee engagement and leadership are undertaken, demonstrating the research gap pertaining to the role of leadership in fostering employee engagement in times of crises in this vital sector.

2.2.2 The South African commercial property sector

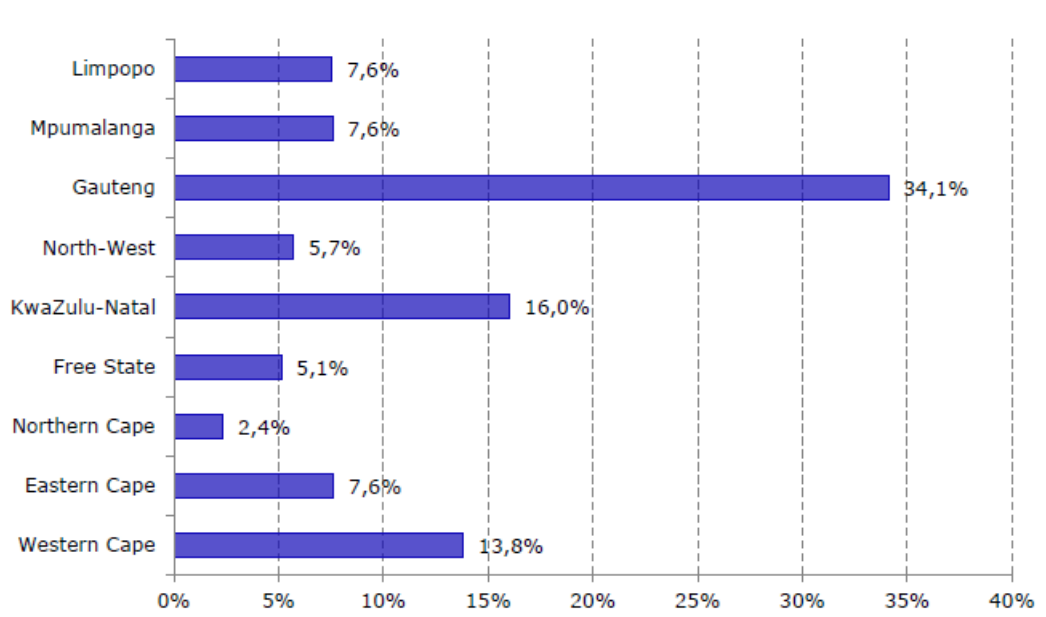
The South African commercial property sector is a significant contributor to the country's GDP (Marzuki, 2018; Creamer Media, 2022) and was one of the hardest hit by the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic and the July 2021 unrest (Stats SA, 2021; Mbhele, 2022). The retail industry is an important role player in South Africa, second only to the government which is the largest employer in the country (Teuteberg, 2021).

Research undertaken by Mordor Intelligence and Advisory projects that the commercial property sector will grow from \$8.68 billion to \$14.52 billion by 2028, representing a compound annual growth rate of 10.8% (Mordor Intelligence Research & Advisory, 2023). These figures demonstrate the significance of the market in the country and to the economy, justifying the general focal area of the study.

2.2.3 The KwaZulu-Natal commercial property sector

While KwaZulu-Natal is the third smallest province in terms of size, it is the second largest contributor to the country's GDP, as depicted in Figure 1, which demonstrates the significance of KwaZulu-Natal to the South African economy as a whole (KwaZulu-Natal Province: Economic Development, Tourism and Environmental Affairs, 2023).

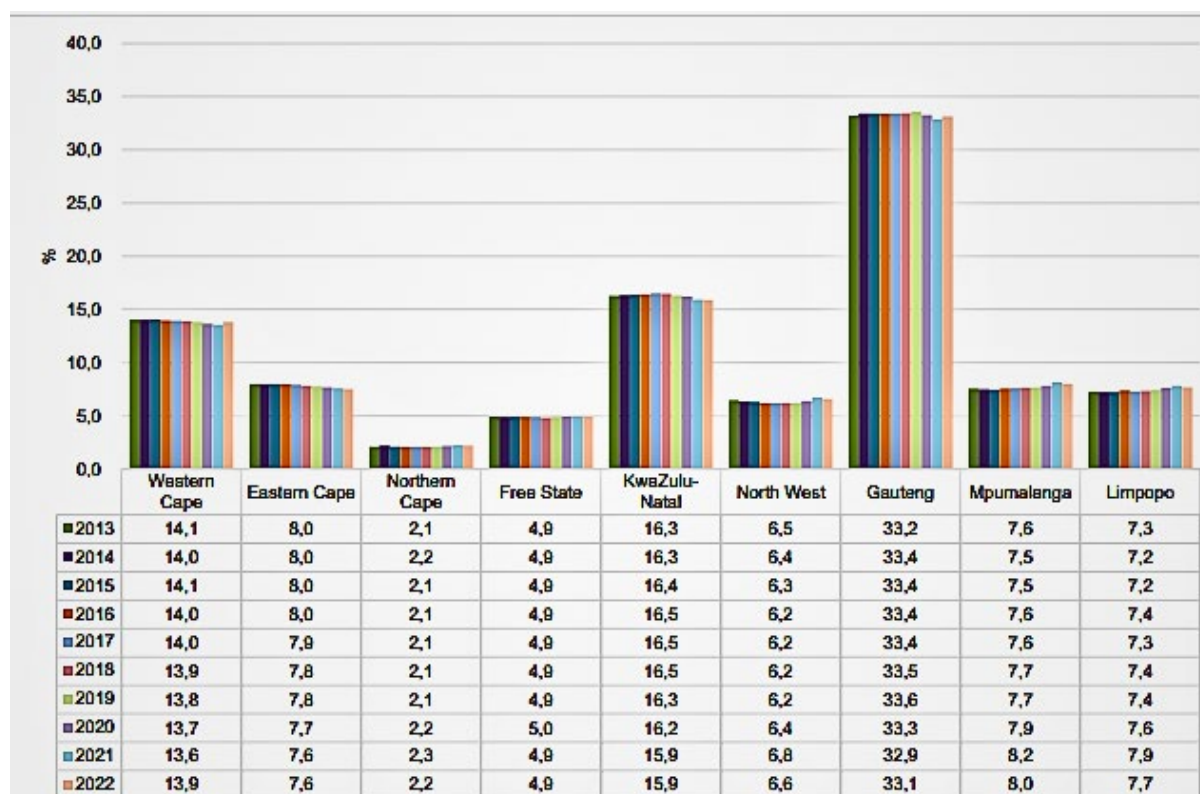
Figure 1: Provincial contribution to South Africa's GDP



Source: KwaZulu-Natal Province: Economic Development, Tourism and Environmental Affairs, (2023)

It is significant to note that KwaZulu-Natal is also the second largest contributor to the trade services industry and has retained this rank from 2013 to 2022. The trade services industry comprises the wholesale, retail, and motor trades as well as hotels and restaurants. This is represented in Figure 2. While this figure does not reflect official statistics, it is aligned to the figures before the benchmarking exercise that was concluded to enhance reporting on provincial GDP numbers (Stats SA, 2023). The graph below thus further illustrates KwaZulu-Natal's significance to the economy and, in particular, to the commercial property sector.

Figure 2: Trade services industry contribution by province



Source: Stats SA (2023)

The commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal has seen significant growth with developments such as Durban's Point Waterfront, Gateway Theatre of Shopping, the development of the Umhlanga Ridge, the La Lucia Office Park, Suncoast Casino and Entertainment World, Sibaya Casino and Entertainment Kingdom, Liberty Midlands Mall and Dube TradePort. These substantial commercial developments represent investments of R1 billion or more and serve to elevate property in the province (Trade & Investment KwaZulu-Natal, 2016).

KwaZulu-Natal houses two of the hemisphere's largest and busiest ports. These ports form part of the Industrial Development Zones, which have contributed to the growth of the commercial property sector in the province (Trade & Investment KwaZulu-Natal, 2016).

The retail sector in the province continues to grow with new developments such as Watercrest Mall in Hillcrest (Trade & Investment KwaZulu-Natal, 2016), Cornubia Mall - a R1.8 billion investment in the north (SA Commercial Prop News, 2016), Ballito Junction (SA Commercial Prop News, 2017), and Westown, a R30 million development that has been dubbed as a mini city between Durban and Johannesburg (BusinessTech, 2022). This, together with the

discussion on the commercial property sector above, demonstrates the significance of this industry to the economy and, in particular, to the province.

2.2.4 Crises affecting the commercial property sector

The Covid-19 pandemic and consequent lockdown that restricted trade affected the retail industry and economy severely (Redda, 2021; Stats SA, 2021). While navigating this crisis, the civil unrest in KwaZulu-Natal and parts of Gauteng saw mass destruction and looting of commercial property (Vhumbunu, 2021). Then, in April 2022, KwaZulu-Natal experienced torrential rains and flooding, causing major damage to infrastructure and property (Mbhele, 2022).

Studies show that retailers play a vital role in the economy as they essentially bridge the gap between the manufacturer and the consumer (Redda, 2021; Hameli, 2018). According to research by Stats SA (2021), the pandemic resulted in the trade industry contracting by 5,5%. Moreover, while all trade sectors reported losses, retail businesses were impacted the most (Stats SA, 2021).

Sales of textiles, clothing and footwear decreased year-on-year between 2019 and 2020 by 94%. Sales of household appliances and equipment, and hardware, paint and glass fell by 89% and 88% respectively. All other retailers saw a 90% decrease in sales (Redda, 2021).

The looting in July 2021 adversely affected the already beleaguered retail industry (Mbhele, 2022). This crisis saw 150,000 jobs at risk in KwaZulu-Natal, primarily due to business closures and delays in reopening (Vhumbunu, 2021; Mundhree & Beharry-Ramraj, 2022).

There was widespread damage to 161 malls with more than 1,190 retail outlets damaged. In total, a sum of 3,000 stores were looted, and approximately 40,000 businesses and around 50,000 informal traders were affected (Vhumbunu, 2021). Retail businesses were the most affected (Stats SA, 2021). Approximately 9% of shopping centres were severely damaged, and the cost to rebuild these amounted to R14 billion (Mundhree & Beharry-Ramraj, 2022).

Table 1 demonstrates the magnitude of the effect of the riots and looting on the economy, which essentially decreased GDP, increased expenses and negatively impacted economic growth (Mundhree & Beharry-Ramraj, 2022).

Table 1: The effects of the rioting and looting on the economy

Effects	Explanation
Decreased GDP	- The riots and looting took place in only two provinces, that is KZN and Gauteng, which have a combined GDP contribution of 50%. - The overall cost impact on South Africa's national GDP stands at R50 billion, while the loss stands at R40 billion, which is 0.7% of the GDP. - The riots and looting impacted South Africa's production, retail, transport and agricultural sectors which resulted in loss of business. - The unrest increased interest rates on long-term borrowing.
Increase in expenses	- Between 8% and 9% of shopping malls were severely damaged, and the cost of rebuilding was concluded at R14 billion. - The effects of the unrest required the government to hand out food parcels to affected communities. - Reinstatement of the SRD R350 grant for those unemployed
Decreased economic growth	- The unrest caused the Rand to depreciate by 2.4% which results in the economy taking longer to recover from the impact of the unrest. - The impact of the unrest on economic growth is expected to pass into 2022. - The unemployment rate plummeted after the events of the unrest; an estimate of 150 000 jobs were at risk within the KZN region alone. - The unrest negatively impacted foreign perception and direct investment. - The unrest decreased confidence levels of consumers and businesses, affecting spending and investment levels within the country. - The unrest interrupted the rollout of the COVID-19 vaccine, which delayed the reopening of the economy.

Source: Mundhree & Beharry-Ramraj, 2022

The floods of April 2022 exacerbated the situation, causing further disruption. Both tenants and landlords suffered significant financial loss as a result of these catastrophic events (SA Commercial Prop News, 2022).

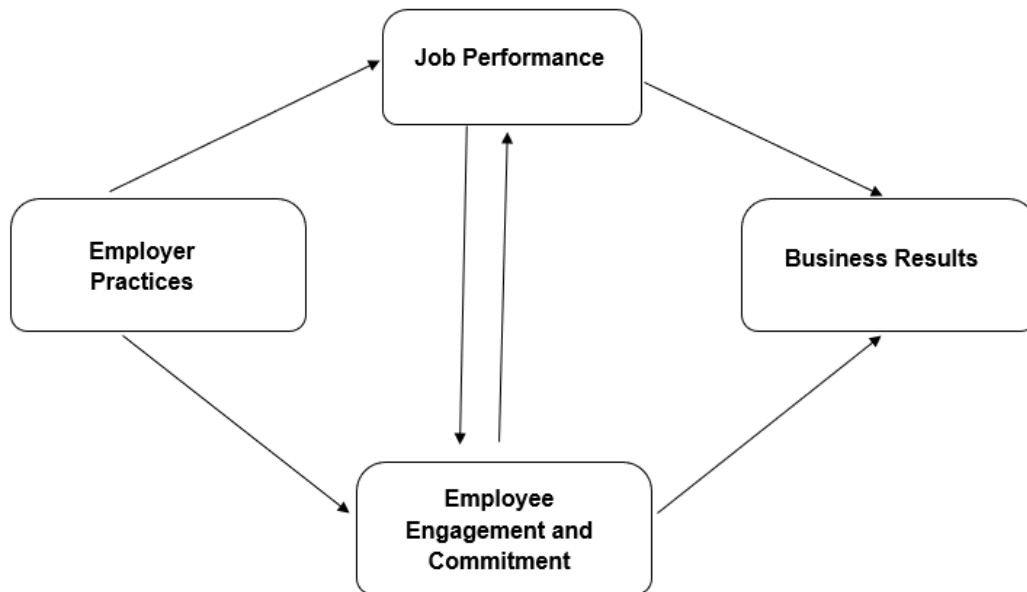
2.2.5 Crises, employee engagement and leadership

The crises detailed above are complex, disruptive, unexpected events that generated concerns about health, job security and organisational sustainability. Saji (2014) argues that it is during times of crises that the services of engaged employees are paramount for business survival.

The relationship between employee engagement and organisational performance has received the attention of several scholars and business leaders. In a complex and volatile environment, organisations seek to develop a competitive advantage that will not only give them an edge over rival firms but will also maintain the sustainability of the business. To this end, the role of employees, who are responsible for delivering organisational objectives, has emerged as a critical driver of competitive advantage (Amir, 2014; Bhasin, 2014; Kumar & Mishra, 2014; Kumar & Pansari, 2015; Massingham, 2020).

Existing research proposes that leadership plays a vital role as a driver of employee engagement (Ahmed *et al.*, 2020; Chanana & Sangeeta, 2021; Kewalramani, 2022). This is significant given the relationship between employee engagement and organisational performance (Saks & Gruman, 2014; Ahmed *et al.*, 2020; Chanana & Sangeeta, 2021; Kewalramani, 2022; Tao *et al.*, 2022). Ultimately, leadership sets the direction and governs the employer-employee relationship. As shown in Figure 3 below, leadership (through employer practices) affects engagement and job performance, all of which affect organisational performance (Ahmed *et al.*, 2020).

Figure 3: Employer practices influence organisational performance



Source: Ahmed *et al.*, 2020

In times of crises, leaders must communicate honestly about their approach in dealing with these events. This is particularly significant as employees play a strategic role in assisting the enterprise to build resilience and mitigate negativity within the organisation itself (Ahmed *et al.*, 2020; Collings *et al.*, 2021). Kewalramani (2022) avers that this generates trust in the leadership, which enhances employee engagement, but Tao *et al.* (2022) argue that in times of crises, employee engagement is affected by fear and uncertainty surrounding possible retrenchments, pay cuts and reduction of benefits. This is supported by Reinwald *et al.* (2021), who state that powerful external events affect the work environment and thus affect employee work engagement. This lends itself to the overarching research objective of ascertaining the role that leaders have in fostering employee engagement in times of crises, given that engagement is the principal enabler of the successful implementation of any business strategy (Wellins *et al.*, 2005; Saji, 2014; Decuyper & Schaufeli, 2020). While the repercussions and extent of the crises described above are plentiful, this study sought to assess these crises in the realm of the commercial property industry in KwaZulu-Natal, with a focus on the shopping centre arena (Redda, 2021; Mbhele, 2022).

Moreover, while existing scholarship demonstrates the interrelationship between leadership, employee engagement and organisational performance, the role of leadership in fostering employee engagement during times of crises appears to be scant.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a case study approach and sought to explore and understand the meaning that the research participants in the organisation under research give to a social problem (Creswell, 2008) The crises mentioned in the preceding sections of this study are social in nature and the employee/employer relationship is arguably a social construct in line with the social exchange theory (Volini *et al.*, 2021; Cherry, 2022). The research aimed to expand on existing knowledge by analysing how leaders perceive their role in fostering employee engagement during times of crises in the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal. Based on the above, an interpretivist paradigm was thus selected and adopted for the study.

An interpretivist approach allowed the researcher to interact with organisational leaders to understand their personal perceptions and experiences (du Plooy-Cilliers *et al.*, 2014; Antwi & Kasim, 2015) around the role of leadership in fostering employee engagement during times of crises in the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal. The participants were able to speak freely in in-depth interviews, which elicited candid opinions and viewpoints. Moreover, the semi-structured interview format allowed for clarity to be sought so that the full meaning of the participants' responses could be obtained (du Plooy-Cilliers *et al.*, 2014; Wilson, 2014; Antwi & Kasim, 2015).

Non-probability, purposive sampling was used to select the most experienced and resource-rich leaders within the property management company under research, who were regarded as being best placed to provide the data required for the study (du Plooy-Cilliers *et al.*, 2014). Eleven semi-structured interviews were carried out with representation from the executive, senior and middle levels of management. All five executive leaders were interviewed, and the senior and middle managers were selected upon recommendation from those executive leaders to obtain the most experienced and knowledgeable leaders in the organisation. Cumulatively, the leaders who participated in the study have two hundred and fourteen years' experience in the industry.

Primary data was collected through semi-structured interviews that took place online after the gatekeeper's letter and ethical clearance were obtained, and the participants granted informed consent.

The interview questions were formulated around the research aim and objectives. The use of open-ended questions allowed the participants to fully express their opinions and feelings (du Plooy-Cilliers *et al.*, 2014). Table 2 reflects the interview schedule.

Table 2: Interview schedule

1.	How did the Covid-19 pandemic, looting and floods affect the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal?
2.	How did leadership in the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal respond to the multiple crises?
3.	What is your understanding of employee engagement?
4.	How did the multiple crises affect employee engagement in the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal?
5.	What challenges were experienced with respect to how leadership handled employee engagement during the multiple crises in the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal?
6.	How did leadership foster employee engagement during the multiple crises in the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal?
7.	With respect to potential future crises, what recommendations do you have for how leadership could better handle employee engagement?

The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analysed into themes. The themes and sub-themes are provided in the findings and discussion section, which includes quotes from the interviews to support the findings.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The main themes and sub-themes that emerged from the thematic analysis are represented in Table 3, which is followed by a discussion of each theme in relation to existing literature and the context of the research questions presented earlier.

Table 3: Themes and sub-themes identified

Themes	Sub-Themes
Severe disruption to the property industry	Economic repercussions
	Unprecedented catastrophic events
	The effects of the crises are still unfolding
	Rapid mobilisation
Balancing empathy and flexibility whilst ensuring business continuity	Employee wellbeing paramount
	Balancing family and work responsibilities
	Mental and emotional support
Expectations and pressure during these challenging times	Leadership challenges and expectations
	Increased workload
	Remote leadership and work challenges
	The crises exposed leadership weaknesses
Increased collaboration and teamwork	Stronger relationships
Communication is key	Open and transparent communication
	Continuous communication
	Facilitating communication

4.1 Severe disruption to the property industry

This theme answers the first research objective, namely, to explore how the crises affected the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal. The findings revealed that while the flooding of April 2022 did affect some of the buildings in the participant portfolios, the effect of this was not as severe as the other two crises.

COVID-19 severely disrupted the retail sector, especially smaller businesses, through closures, reduced revenues, lack of reserves, and unpaid rent. The looting exacerbated these issues. The financial repercussions of the pandemic emerged as the first sub-theme relating to the severe disruption that these crises caused in the property sector. Small businesses, which are an instrumental contributor to the country's GDP, were the most affected. The findings revealed that the impact on small businesses was most severe. Given that SMMEs

play a vital role in the South African economy from an innovation, job creation and economic growth perspective, and considering that they contribute significantly to the GDP, the impact of these crises is apparent. Research undertaken in 2017 reveals that SMMEs contribute 36% towards the national GDP. In addition, these enterprises employ just over 47% of the national workforce and account for more than 70% of the jobs in the country (Mundhree & Beharry-Ramraj, 2022). The impact was devastating overall, and the sector has not yet fully recovered.

4.1.1 Economic consequences of the crises

“Covid hit our commercial property sector very, very badly.” (P2)

The economic effects of both Covid-19 and the looting rippled through to property management companies, who had to manage high arrears due to tenants being unable to trade. Property management companies earn income through leasing commissions and management fees that are based on rental collections.

“Revenue-wise, collections were down... Obviously, buying power was affected as well. Shops were looted, so tenants were not even operating, so it definitely affected our revenue...our arrears obviously skyrocketed.” (P11)

The double impact of COVID-19 and the civil unrest saw a retraction in trade by 5.5% in the third quarter of 2021 (Stats SA, 2021). Businesses were forced to downsize or close, resulting in job losses (Redda, 2021; Vhumbunu, 2021).

4.1.2 Unprecedented chaotic events

Most participants characterised COVID-19 and the looting as unprecedented, the effects of which could not be anticipated and for which there was no clear roadmap to navigate these crises.

“With Covid, and I don't think anybody really knew what to expect, and I think it was exactly that...the fear of the unknown. The same with the looting also, especially in KZN ... fear just gripped everybody.” (P1)

Fear and uncertainty compounded matters as leaders struggled to navigate around risk and safety issues. Moreover, as one participant stated, no amount of planning or contingency measures could have prepared the industry for the looting.

“It was devastating!” No one expects a shopping centre to be burned to the ground; there's no contingency for that. It's like, how do we trade if this happens or this happens, and it's all those little things, but it's never, ever something so drastic!” (P3)

Participants generally felt that the repercussions of the looting were more severe than those of the pandemic. The pandemic was a national crisis, and there was relief offered by the government and the landlords, but the looting was primarily in KwaZulu-Natal. While landlords had building insurance, many of the smaller retailers did not have sufficient, or in some cases, any insurance. Moreover, these tenants had no way of generating revenue while the rebuild was underway. Some of these smaller tenants could not recover and had to close their doors permanently.

During the pandemic, which spearheaded remote work and fast-tracked e-commerce in South Africa, office workers could work from home, and some retailers could essentially continue their operations during the less restrictive phases of lockdown. However, the looting destroyed premises, and everything was either stolen or damaged. The businesses had nothing.

“Once lockdown gradually decreased...when we thought the worst was over, we actually got hit with the worst of them all, which was the looting - it was something that nobody, irrespective of whether you've been in the retail industry for 2 years, 20 years, 25 years, there was never, ever destruction of that magnitude... I don't think anyone ever foresaw something of that magnitude ever taking place.” (P4)

4.1.3 The effects of the crises are still unfolding

Many participants stated that the full effect of both the pandemic and the looting is still unfolding. In the case of the looting, centres that required extensive rebuilding have not returned to trading levels prior to the crisis. This is particularly significant considering the effect that the COVID-19 pandemic had on the commercial property industry.

“I actually still believe that we are still reeling from the effects of the looting and rioting because trade hasn't returned back to normal from prior to looting. We are still feeling that effect” (P8)

“This obviously has a lingering effect where you're sitting with gearing now on buildings and you're sitting with other extended percentage ratios in terms of income to expenses because of the fact that you had to ensure you retain your tenants.” (P5)

The office sector was the hardest hit by COVID-19. This sector, whilst showing levels of improvement, is still struggling and has not regained lost ground.

“We saw a lot of downsizing and closing (of offices) at the time, obviously because people realised they can do this work from home model. I think the office environment has taken the worst knock.” (P6)

“...hit the office market exceptionally hard because now we are sitting with vacancies that we certainly haven't seen in decades.” (P5)

High vacancy levels in commercial property buildings translate to lower rental income for property owners. This is not only in terms of empty shops and offices but also in terms of achieving lower rentals on renewals or new lets, as tenants have more bargaining power (Lepere, 2023). Even since the lifting of the lockdown and the return to full commercial activity, the expected return to the office has not unfolded. Moreover, the participants expressed that the industry has not yet fully recovered from the crisis, with changes in shopper patterns being noted and reduced spending on luxury items. Interest rate hikes have further compounded the matter (Lepere, 2023)

The implications of the effect that these crises have had on the commercial property sector support the significance of the sector to the economy and suggest future research opportunities surrounding the changes required in leasing strategies and the use of office space to ensure sustainability for commercial landlords.

4.1. 4 Rapid mobilisation

In terms of the pandemic, the leaders had to act swiftly, firstly in terms of remote working and secondly in terms of ensuring centres were COVID-19 compliant throughout the various levels of the lockdown.

“We literally had to mobilise our teams within a very short space of time... and we had to prepare our tenants and get our buildings ready to be Covid compliant, and this again is something that no one has ever had to do or at such short notice...We had to get signage done. We had to get lines put up. You had to educate your tenants, as you could only allow a certain number of shoppers at a time. So, all of that fell to the people managing the buildings and our security, our service providers, on how to do it, then it was the PPE, making sure that everyone had the necessary PPE. Getting the sanitisers on site...” (P7)

There were logistical implications in terms of adjusting signage and educating tenants as the lockdown levels were amended. The leaders also had to ensure they had the necessary permits in place for operational staff to go to their buildings.

4.2 Balancing empathy and flexibility whilst ensuring business continuity

The unprecedented chaos meant leaders had to navigate uncharted territory to support worried, distracted employees whilst still ensuring organisational objectives were met. Remote

work isolation during the hard lockdown period negatively impacted engagement, but the organisation employed interactive, fun virtual sessions to mitigate the loss of connectivity. Most teams rallied, displaying extra effort. The leaders as employees felt that the expectation and additional pressure were immense, and at times, they felt unsupported. These findings relate to the second objective, being the effect of the crises on employee engagement in the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal.

The participants emphasised the need for flexibility and empathy in leadership during times of crisis. Despite the disruptions to trade and manufacturing, the property management business had to continue offering a service to the landlords and tenants. The leaders who were interviewed expressed that trying to maintain business continuity whilst accommodating these challenges was difficult.

"I think the biggest thing was being supportive and understanding... supporting the staff by trying to be a little bit flexible in their working hours. I think it was trying to help solve find a balance between work life and home life because, I mean, the thing is, work still has to carry on, which is horrendous to say." (P1)

"You still need to be output-driven, although you have to balance the humanity and the leadership and the guidance and the support...because you still have to earn an income for your company. So, you can keep your staff and pay salaries." (P5)

4.2.1 Employee wellbeing is paramount

Notwithstanding the importance of business continuity, most of the participants stressed that employee safety and wellbeing were always the most significant consideration. Where staff were unable to cope, they were encouraged to rest and resume their duties later. In some instances, work was reassigned to, for example, a staff member who did not have the compounding challenges of looking after children whilst trying to fulfil work obligations.

As participant 8 put it

"Look, any company without the employees are nothing, so you need to engage with the employees... I mean, they are the heart of the whole industry or the heart of the company ... they are the company." (P8)

4.2.2 Balancing family and work responsibilities

The shift to remote working proved challenging to employees who were trying to meet their work obligations whilst homeschooling their children, taking care of sick family members or being ill themselves.

The leaders expressed challenges with employee engagement, mainly concerning remote working. These ranged from managing output where there were constraints with workers who had to take care of children, to staff who were actively disengaged. While remote working has been lauded as improving productivity and engagement, the enforced lockdown brought negative consequences such as reduced teamwork and collaboration in day-to-day activities. This is because the extended mandatory work-from-home requirement during the pandemic, coupled with restrictions on social interaction, brought about feelings of isolation and reduced meaningful social connections. Research suggests that extended working from home can, in fact, be demotivating and lead to decreased levels of engagement (de Klerk *et al.*, 2021)

Participant 7 explained that it brought a realisation that:

"Your staff are actual people, that they have a life outside of work...When people had Teams meetings, you would see their kids running around. So, regardless of whether it's a pandemic or not... there are still instances where people can't make it to work or can't do this or... that because there is something that's going on, and I think that work just needs to be able to understand that. Listen, as long as it's not all of the time, but when somebody needs something that, as a workplace, you are there to support them".
(P7)

The challenge of balancing empathy and flexibility with the responsibility of maintaining output and business continuity was uncovered. Leaders have responsibility and accountability to the organisation in terms of achieving organisational objectives and to the workers in their care (Saji, 2014). In times of crises, leadership decisions and actions are even more significant since the crisis situation could threaten the organisation's survival (Balasubramanian & Fernandes, 2022).

Inasmuch as the leaders expressed the importance of ensuring business continuity in servicing their clients and the communities, the importance of staff wellbeing from a physical, mental, and emotional perspective remained a top priority. In this regard, the leaders ensured that their teams had the necessary resources to carry out their tasks and set direction to guide

their teams accordingly (Ahmed *et al.*, 2020; Chanana & Sangeeta, 2021). However, they also encouraged staff to rest or take care of family responsibilities as required.

4.2.3 Mental and emotional support

The organisation placed much emphasis on mental health and provided support for its employees.

“You check up and you tell HR these are the 10 people that you think is really going downhill in terms of their emotional health, and I will check up on them daily as well.” (P5)

“(The company) offered counselling to any staff which were affected or even if they weren’t affected directly. We would... see how everybody is and what was going on, not just work-wise, but personally wise because as I said, everyone was struggling with their own demons.” (P1)

Participant 5 emphasised that leadership played a critical role during the crises.

“I think leadership was very important. The calmness, the guidance, the infrastructure that you had within your company was crucial.” (P5)

Notably, most of the leaders emphasised that their teams were supportive and did their best in the circumstances. This suggests good relations between the leaders and their subordinates, which is an important foundation of employee engagement. It can thus be argued that the employees felt psychologically safe due to the culture of trust emanating from supportive leadership conduct (Saji, 2014; Saks & Gruman, 2014). In addition, supportive leaders create supportive followers (Balasubramanian & Fernandes, 2022).

Balasubramanian and Fernandes (2022) suggest that it is imperative that leaders listen to employees’ concerns during crises and give staff practical and psychological support. To this end, the organisation facilitated mental health and emotional support sessions to combat isolation and help staff deal with fears and pressure arising from the crises. Interactive sessions were designed to create participation and meaningful connections during times of lockdown. The social, relational element of work creates a sense of belonging, necessary for employee engagement (de Klerk *et al.*, 2021).

4.3 Expectations and pressure during these challenging times

The participants expressed that the crises amplified the demands on leaders. Many participants felt that the expectation of them as leaders was very high. The increased

workloads emanating from additional reporting, rental remissions, liaison with tenants and landlords and ensuring COVID-19 compliance as the country shifted through various levels of lockdown, caused additional pressure for leaders and their teams. The looting brought similar pressure in increased administrative burdens and operational challenges. Most of the leaders stated that their teams stepped up when needed, putting in extra effort and assisting where possible. This finding is supported by Saji's (2014) stance that employee engagement in times of crises is even more important. Workers who possess high levels of engagement are innovative and creative and display extra-role behaviour (Rahmadani *et al.*, 2020; Decuyper & Schaufeli, 2020). These findings address the second research objective, which was to determine the effect of the crises on employee engagement in the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal.

4.3.1 Leadership challenges and expectations

Two of the five executive-level leaders expressed a lack of support from the C-Suite of the organisation.

"But there was nothing from a higher level of leadership, like from our COO or our CEO, that almost intervened to say, listen, the people here are going through something. You know, I chatted to our clients and said maybe they're not able to work right now, that didn't happen. So, we still had to deliver." (P7)

"During like the looting and the flooding, it was very much a KZN issue and bear in mind we report into landlords and head offices that are not based in KZN and they were very removed from the situation and I felt they needed to be a lot more sympathetic to what was going on and it also shows the cracks that if something happens in one region another region is not able to pick up for them" (P7)

"I don't know if you're really senior, your directors and your CFOs and COOs - if it's because they're too far removed from reality, because that involvement was minimalistic." (P5)

This finding opens up an area for future research regarding the effects of crises on leaders. Even though leaders are expected to carry out their tasks under extremely stressful circumstances whilst trying to reduce the pressures on their teams (Balasubramanian & Fernandes, 2022), they are human.

Several leaders felt immense pressure with subordinates depending on them for support and guidance whilst they were trying to navigate the crises and meet expectations from their leaders and clients.

“I also am a human being. I'm just like every person, just like my staff. The staff under me are looking to me for emotional and professional support. I also should have – at that stage - said I also need that professional and emotional support.” (P2)

“Personally, I think it was a lot of pressure because staff expected us to have all the answers... This was something that none of us knew and as soon as something happened, obviously, we were the first points of call, but we necessarily didn't have all the answers...” (P1)

Despite these pressures, leaders at the middle and senior levels expressed that the support of their leaders proved instrumental in assisting them to guide their teams through these uncharted waters.

“There was always the presence of the leadership, so we were never left with the doubt of how do we do, what do we do next. There was always the guidance that came through” (P4)

“I think leadership was good... We did get all the support we needed.” (P3)

4.3.2 Increased workload

Both COVID-19 and the looting increased the burden on the property management professionals. Schedules and tracking sheets had to be compiled per tenant in order for landlords to consider rent remissions. The looting, although of a shorter duration than the pandemic, resulted in the leaders and staff working extraordinarily late hours, communicating via cell phone from early hours to late at night.

“I literally spent the entire looting week on the phone with somebody or the other on my team more from a support perspective, but also in assisting them because not everyone has the necessary contacts to arrange for things, so it's almost fell to me to arrange additional security, mobilise this, mobilise that because I've got different relationships. I would say I've been in the industry for a long time, so if I need a favour, I know who to call and literally you had to pull favours to get things done. But I was literally with my team... I didn't sleep for one week” (P7)

"It became too much...landlords were wanting these schedules upon schedules upon schedules. So, we were doing hundreds and hundreds of manual schedules. And it was resulting in burnout because we were working harder than we'd ever worked before." (P2)

Leaders had to balance their own personal fears and pressure with the increased demands from their seniors.

"Whilst our employers offer you the support and the backing, I also just think that sometimes they need to understand that we are also human. The looting was at 15 centres, but it was also affecting us in our personal homes...and I mean the working conditions - whilst the communication was there, you were still expected to work ridiculous hours. So, you were stressed because these guys were coming into your neighbourhoods and our husbands were going out to create blockades...your kids at home... constantly on the go. I used to be on the phone from literally around 5:00 in the morning until way into late hours of the night." (P4)

4.3.3 Remote leadership and work challenges

Remote working, especially during the lockdown period of the pandemic, was mainly seen as difficult by the participants. Several participants felt that being away from the office and not being able to physically interact with their colleagues was challenging.

"Working remotely, whilst you can do it, it probably slows down the work rate... You actually lose a bit of touch with employees and staff when you actually are remote, I find it better to be back in the office and you know in the fray with people, that you understand what they're going through when they are frustrated and that sort of thing, and also I think for the company culture. And I think you can quickly lose that when you're not all together in the office. So, when you are remote, you don't actually pick up when someone's feeling overworked, overwhelmed, unless they actually come out and really state it on e-mail or something, whereas in the office, you can pick up on body language, mood swings and that sort of thing." (P6)

The absence of interaction meant limited collaboration and discussion.

"If you work from home, you don't have the challenges of your opinion or your output, etc. You work sort of very much on this is what I do, and this is how I do it. So, you sort of stop your own growth and development." (P5)

Remote working challenged the traditional ways of working, and as one participant put it, leaders had to trust that their team would deliver what was required.

"We had to mobilise our teams to go completely remote...It's also a new way of working with your team...I think you just have to have trust in your team that they will do what's required of them, and I must be honest, the team always comes to the party. So, it may not be your traditional 8 to 5 working hours, but they did it as and when they could." (P7)

Managing teams remotely proved challenging at times, especially as far as ensuring work obligations were fulfilled and in the extra effort required to check in on team members.

"There were tight deadlines, and if a person was unable to work at the time or there are delays, then that was holding everything back. It was a big challenge because, you know, when something is due it's due...so we will end up using the phone talking to each other, trying to make things happen or to do work for the person that is unable to log in" (P9)

"I think the challenge is you get sort of very wrapped up in your own environment, so it's almost you've got to make a concerted effort to keep reaching out to staff to check that everything's okay and...that the workload is okay. You had to constantly keep reaching out. It wasn't just like natural – when you're in the office and you talk on a day-to-day basis." (P6)

4.3.4 The crises exposed leadership weaknesses

Leadership styles and the relationships that leaders have with their subordinates expose leadership weaknesses.

"I think your leaders who thought that it was just a title... probably had the hardest time throughout this because they really had to make an effort to get through all the challenges successfully with their team intact and with output intact. The leadership where's there's always support and involvement probably also took a bit of a knock in terms of... over compromising because you also need to look after yourself in terms of not being emotionally and physically exhausted, and the days were exceptionally long." (P5)

"It's the relationship you have with your team. If you're a manager who says do this, do this, do that. You know you don't really care what they are going through in their lives and all those things. They will do the bare minimum and go home. But if you are a manager that leads by empathy and support in not just their jobs, they will give you

the support that you need when you need it. I just think it's overall how you communicate with your staff all the year through, not just when you need them in terms of crisis.” (P3)

Some participants felt that leadership weaknesses were exposed during the crises. This ties into existing scholarship views that positive leadership styles enhance employee engagement (Popli & Rizvi, 2016; Grant, 2019) and corroborates that leadership in times of crises is critical (Balasubramanian & Fernandes, 2022). The significant implication here is that employee engagement is intrinsically linked to leadership, which denotes the importance of the employee-employer relationship. Relationships take time to develop, and as highlighted in the findings, leaders who did not have strong relationships with their teams struggled with leading remotely and motivating their teams. This is supported by Lazim *et al.* (2020) and Tao *et al.* (2022), who advocate that leaders need to take measures to boost morale and enhance motivation, particularly in challenging times, where employee engagement is put to the test. This is aligned with the third research objective.

4.4 Increased collaboration and teamwork

Several participants added that traditionally, portfolios run independently of each other, but during the looting, particularly, there was increased collaboration and pooling of resources. This collaboration was not limited to role players within the organisation.

“I would say everyone banded together simply because we had to rely on, besides just (our company), other property companies as well. So, it's all of the professionals in the sector - we had to chat to each other.” (P7).

“We usually work on our separate teams... but during Covid we were working together...and from that time up until now...we meet together and make sure that you are all on the same line and understand what is required in order to achieve that result...” (P9)

“...So, I think it was as much as it (the looting) tore people apart, it also brought the community together.” (P1)

Some participants added that the combined efforts of those affected by the crises, resulted in enhanced problem-solving.

“I would say it was an eye opener, and it helped us realise that we need each other. When I'm saying each other, not only people working for (our company) as a managing

agent, but others as well, because we face the same problems. And when we engage and talk about these things, it helps us find some solutions quicker.” (P9)

“...especially during the looting - It's like, what are you doing now? What resource do you have? How can we pool resources?... There was a lot of coming together just to see how we can almost resolve the crisis.” (P7)

Participants expressed that there was collaboration with internal and external stakeholders. In addition, team members did not need to be directed to help where needed. This ties in with Balasubramanian and Fernandes' (2022) view that navigating the challenges of complex crises needs a collective approach. The authors advocate that leaders need to seek information, guidance, and assistance from internal and external sources. In keeping with the tenets of situational leadership, this encourages leaders to establish the individual strengths of team members and use these for maximum benefit (Balasubramanian & Fernandes, 2022). This ties in with the third objective, which is to identify the role that leadership plays in fostering employee engagement during times of crises in the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal.

4.4.1 Strengthening of teams

The participants felt that the crises helped teams to forge stronger relationships as they united to navigate the storms.

“I believe that this crisis actually brought us more together. The moment this crisis happened, I think all the staff got together and they created another bond. I mean, they took it up to another level...Identify what strengths your staff have - you might not have the same strengths as the other - however, working together, you would have a full...basically a round ball.” (P8)

4.5 Communication is key

The importance of communication in times of crises and, insofar as employee engagement is concerned, was highlighted by the participants as a key role of leadership.

“We believe the communication was one of the key factors... We always knew every time what was happening. The support system was always in place. Communication is the key for employers to employees. Find out in what space they are in, firstly, whether they are safe, whether they need help. Communication would be the best tool that I would say any employer should use.” (P8)

During times of crises, communication is a fundamental, critical tool that forms part of the main responsibilities of leaders (Balasubramanian & Fernandes, 2022). The importance of open, honest, and constant communication came out very strongly in the findings. This was viewed not only as an important leadership tool to foster employee engagement but also as a critical driver of employee engagement.

4.5.1 Open and transparent communication

All the participants highly emphasised the importance of open, clear, and transparent communication.

“You have to speak up if you are needing something. What I feel is that people expect the leadership team to have the answers, and it's not always like that. It's a two-way stream.” (P2)

“Ask them... Don't just assume everybody's in a bad place or everybody's okay or whatever and do what you always do as a leader and run with it.” (P5)

Some of the leaders expressed that there was much pressure on them to “have all the answers” as their teams looked to them for guidance. Balasubramanian and Fernandes (2022) advocate that leaders should be direct and factual, stating the reality of the current situation even when they are uncertain. It creates what the authors term a sense of “us-ness” (Balasubramanian & Fernandes, 2022, p. 6), that the leaders and their teams are facing the storms together, which ties in with the importance of collaboration. This engenders trust, an integral component of relationships and employee engagement (Kewalramani, 2022). Moreover, open, transparent communication helps to allay anxiety, shows the employees exactly what the organisation is doing and what is expected of them.

Communication was viewed as the cornerstone of employee engagement.

“I think it (employee engagement) is all being part of a team and communicating with everybody and being on the same page, showing that we are all part of the bigger picture.” (P1)

“(Employee engagement is) open lines of communication with your employees.” (P6)

4.5.2 Continuous communication

The participants emphasised that continuous communication was important to ensure that all staff were informed of events and expectations. This was particularly important when teams

were working remotely and during the looting, so that all role players were abreast of current developments and could plan accordingly.

“... continuous communication. Every morning, every afternoon, every evening with your teams, to see how they are personally” (P5)

“Keep employees informed at all times, and especially in times of crisis. You need to make sure that they know what’s going on.” (P9)

The importance of communication for problem-solving and clear information flow was also highlighted as one of the areas for leaders to focus on in times of crises, in line with the third research objective.

“So, I think it has in a way made us aware of what types of communication we need on a regular basis.” (P9)

“So, we have to keep everybody in the loop... so there’s no stress and anxiety....” (P10)

4.5.3 Facilitating communication

The leaders stated that every effort was made to ensure that teams had the necessary infrastructure, tools, and access to maintain communication whilst working remotely and in navigating the looting crisis.

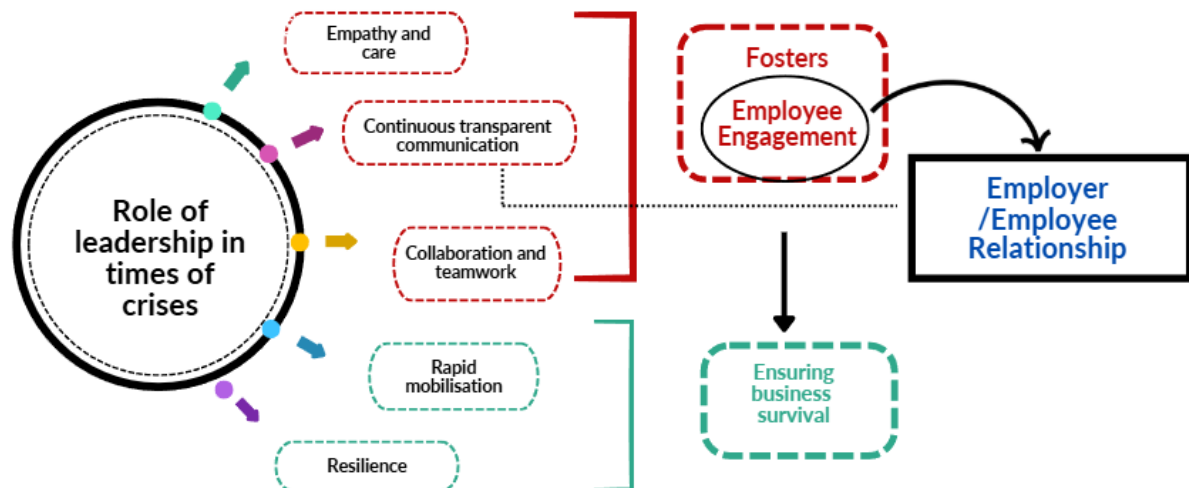
5. MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

The foundational pillar of employee engagement, as highlighted in the findings, is the relationship between the leaders and their teams. This relationship drives the interaction between the leaders and their teams and can be directly attributed to the level of support and commitment that employees are willing to provide (Saks & Gruman, 2014; Kewalramani, 2022). This is supported by Grant (2019), who states that leaders can alter the direction of the organisation through employing strategies to enhance employee engagement. Relationships need time to develop. This suggests that leaders need to ensure a positive relationship with their teams as a foundation for employee engagement, and this needs to be in place before trying to motivate and guide teams through crises.

While existing research emphasises the impact of employee engagement for organisational success (Wellins *et al.*, 2005; Saji, 2014; Decuyper & Schaufeli, 2020), organisational survival becomes the key objective during times of crisis (Saji, 2014; Lazim *et al.*, 2020; Balasubramanian & Fernandes, 2022). To this end, leaders must display adaptive behaviour,

respond, and act decisively, whilst demonstrating resilience and courage. These elements point to ensuring business continuity (organisational survival) as depicted in Figure 4.

Figure 4: The role of leadership in fostering employee engagement in times of crisis



Leaders cannot ensure business continuity without the support of engaged teams (Saji, 2014). They therefore need to ensure that they demonstrate compassion and care (Balasubramanian & Fernandes, 2022).

Communication emerged as a fundamental factor not only during times of crises but also as central to employee engagement. This can be related to the calibre of the employer/employee relationship and leadership style, which in itself points to the organisational culture (Saks & Gruman, 2014; Grant, 2019; Gallup Incorporated, 2023).

Leaders also need to foster a collaborative environment to develop creative solutions to complex problems. Collaboration suggests that leaders value their staff's input, which creates a sense of psychological meaningfulness, necessary for employee engagement (Saks & Gruman, 2014; Decuyper & Schaufeli, 2020; Rahmadani *et al.*, 2020).

Empowering team members strengthens teams and allows the individual strengths across teams to be used to mitigate the threats posed by the crises and develop strategies in this regard for any potential future crises (Grant, 2019; Balasubramanian & Fernandes, 2022). Strong, engaged teams are arguably a prerequisite for crisis management (Saji, 2014).

Essentially, therefore, the managerial implications of the findings point to the role of leadership in fostering employee engagement during times of crises as ensuring open and honest

communication, encouraging collaboration, empowering teams, and demonstrating compassion and care. This, together with adaptive leadership that demonstrates decisiveness, resilience and courage, will help keep the organisation afloat during times of crises (Balasubramanian & Fernandes, 2022).

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal faced unprecedented challenges during the combined impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and civil unrest in 2021. The research reveals several critical themes in crisis leadership: the severe disruption to business operations, particularly affecting smaller retailers; the delicate balance leaders faced between maintaining business continuity and showing empathy to stressed employees; and the paramount importance of employee wellbeing during remote operations. Communication emerged as a fundamental theme, with leaders emphasising transparent and continuous dialogue. While these crises exposed some leadership weaknesses, they also fostered increased collaboration across traditionally separate portfolios. The findings suggest that successful crisis leadership requires a foundation of strong employer-employee relationships, combined with compassionate leadership, decisive action, team empowerment, and transparent communication.

This study is not without limitations. It adopted a case study approach focusing on leaders from a single property management company in KwaZulu-Natal and only captured leadership perspectives without including subordinate viewpoints. The study findings can thus not be generalised. This narrow scope suggests opportunities for future research drawing on a mixed methods approach that could incorporate employee perspectives and examine multiple organisations for a more comprehensive understanding of crisis leadership in the commercial property sector.

The impact of crises on leaders merits further investigation, as participants reported that their expectations of them as leaders were immense. While leaders demonstrated resilience and provided strong support to their teams during crises, they rarely received similar support from their superiors. This disconnect between the compassion leaders showed versus the support they received suggests an important area for future research, building on the proposed model (Figure 4) of leadership's role in fostering employee engagement during crises.

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