

## Using a Multistage Qualitative Leadership Style Study to Identify Strategic Imperatives for Post COVID-19 Curricular Planning

### استخدام دراسة نوعية متعددة المراحل لأسلوب القيادة لتحديد الضرورات الاستراتيجية للتخطيط المناهج بعد COVID-19

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## Abstract

**Background:** To prevent the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, universities around the world were forced to close unexpectedly. In dealing with the emergency e-learning strategy, educational leaders faced an adaptable and transformative challenge with new emergent educational needs. Curriculum changes were made, and new tactics were implemented.

**Objective:** The purpose of this study was to examine the various leadership styles required for each stage of curricular reform.

**Methods:** This research comprised 70 ASU-MENA-FRI fellowship programme participants from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Participants in seven consensus-based planning sessions (CBPS) highlighted the required leadership style for curricular change in response to COVID-19. It lasted one month, from May 11th to June 7th, 2020.

**Results:** The strategic imperatives for curricular change derived from the CBPS were divided into five major themes: understanding the status quo, collaboration between experts and skilled faculty, generation of stakeholder buy-in, preparation of the curriculum renewal framework, and monitoring and evaluation.

The participants chose authoritative, coaching, affiliative, pacesetter, democratic, and coercive leadership styles as the most appropriate for the effective execution of each step of the change process.

**Conclusion:** As a result of lockdown, Covid-19 was regarded as a pandemic with unparalleled consequences on all levels of learning programs. It was critical to identify the many leadership styles that might be employed interchangeably for the inevitable curricular adjustment to deal with distant learning as a major problem during that crisis.

**Keywords:** COVID-19; curricular change; leadership styles.

## المستخلص:

**الخلفية:** أدت جائحة كورونا (COVID-19) إلى الإغلاق المفاجئ للجامعات في جميع أنحاء العالم لتقليل انتشار المرض. واجه القادة التربويون تحديًا قوياً للتعامل مع استراتيجيات التعلم الإلكتروني في حالات الطوارئ بسبب الاحتياجات التعليمية الجديدة الناشئة عن الأزمة. تم إجراء تغييرات في المناهج التعليمية، واعتماد استراتيجيات جديدة للتعلم.

**الهدف:** استهدفت هذه الدراسة تحليل أنماط القيادة المختلفة اللازمة لكل خطوة من خطوات التغيير في المناهج وطرق التعلم. **الأساليب:** ضمت هذه الدراسة 70 مشاركاً في برنامج الزمالة ASU-MENA-FRI، يمثلون دولاً من منطقة الشرق الأوسط وشمال إفريقيا (MENA). تم عقد سبع جلسات تخطيط قائمة على الإجماع على الرأي حيث سُلط المشاركون الضوء على أسلوب القيادة المطلوب لتطوير المناهج الدراسية استجابة لما سببته جائحة الكورونا من تغييرات في طرق التعلم. تم إجراء الدراسة على مدار شهر واحد من 11 مايو إلى 7 يونيو 2020.

**النتائج:** من نتائج جلسات التخطيط القائمة على الإجماع على الرأي، تم تصنيف الضرورات الإستراتيجية لتطوير المناهج الدراسية إلى خمسة مواضيع رئيسية تتلخص في: فهم الوضع الراهن، والتعاون بين الخبراء وأعضاء هيئة التدريس المحنكين، والعمل على إكتساب تأييد أصحاب المصلحة، وإعداد إطار لتطوير المناهج الدراسية، والمراقبة والتقييم. إختار المشاركون أساليب القيادة الأكثر ملاءمة للتنفيذ الفعال لكل خطوة من خطوات عملية التغيير لتكون الأنماط الموثوقة، والتدريبية، والإنتمائية، والديمقراطية، والقسرية على التوالي.

**الخلاصة:** يعتبر وباء كورونا Covid-19 وباءً له تأثيرات غير مسبوقه على جميع مستويات برامج التعلم نتيجة لإغلاق المؤسسات التعليمية. كان من الأهمية بمكان تحديد أنماط القيادة المختلفة التي يمكن استخدامها بالتبادل للتطوير الحتمي للمناهج الدراسية للتعامل مع التعلم عن بعد بإعتباره تحدياً رئيسياً خلال تلك الأزمة.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** COVID-19، تطوير المناهج، القيادة .

## INTRODUCTION

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic that emerged in December 2019, the vast majority of countries around the world implemented an emergency lockdown, followed by the implementation of social distancing strategies to minimize the spread of infection, causing disruptions in attendance at various schools and universities<sup>1</sup>. The puzzling aspect is that the consequences may persist longer and create greater difficulties than anyone anticipated. In response to this situation, the vast majority of medical schools worldwide switched from on-campus to online distance learning.

This sudden transition confused both staff and students because it was implemented without prior planning or training<sup>2</sup>. Transitioning to distance learning necessitates not just the adoption of new tactics, but also fundamental shifts in stakeholders' mindsets, norms, and convictions,<sup>3</sup> and it may necessitate new strategies. It has been demonstrated that real leadership attributes 4-7 are required for the renewal and creation of innovative and high-quality education.

Academic leaders must break through deeply ingrained behavioural patterns, deal with faculty members' different points of view, and challenge institutional culture in order to practically lead the move to distant learning with compassion. They must also make plans for the following academic year in order to strengthen and maintain the recently enacted reforms after the crisis has passed. Academic leaders who have the flexibility to see opportunities in crisis situations may re-specify institutional roles through innovative design and use technology to change or even abandon inefficient inherited ways<sup>3</sup>.

To successfully implement curricular changes, several leadership styles must be used. Goleman (2000) identified six major leadership styles that influence work atmosphere and results. He emphasized that leaders who are skilled in many types perform better<sup>8</sup>. DeMatthews (2014) developed a strategy for achieving excellent curricular transformation

by combining leadership theories with quality management approaches. He concluded that during the curriculum change, leaders must effectively apply leadership theories. This article discusses a road map model for post-COVID 19 curriculum adjustments, as well as the leadership styles required to complete and maintain the curricular renewal phases<sup>9</sup>.

## Methods

### Study Design

An exploratory qualitative study was conducted. This focuses on establishing the strategic imperatives needed for curricular changes after COVID 19. The aim of the study is to determine the prevalent leadership style model in processes of curriculum renewal. It took place from May 11 through June 7 of 2020.

### Participants

Academic leaders from various Middle Eastern medical schools were among those targeted. Random sampling was utilized as a sample approach in the investigation. The research sample consists of 70 ASU MENA FRI fellowship programme participants. They represent countries from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).

### Data Collection Tools

The data of the study was collected through two methods:

The first method was a leadership style test, to determine participants' leadership styles (<https://testyourself.psychtests.com/testid/2152>).

The second method was through CBPS. Seven groups of participants were formed. Each group was expected to develop a thorough plan to sustain the curricular adjustments implemented in response to the COVID 19 study halt in their institutions, emphasizing the required leadership style for each step. A template for guidance was provided<sup>9</sup>. The LISTSERV dialogue between groups was monitored and maintained on a daily basis. Furthermore, demographic information about

the individuals was gathered through specialized questionnaire items.

## Data Analysis

Descriptive data were collected and analysed using an excel spreadsheet, and the results were given as a mean and percentage. There was thematic analysis of qualitative data.

IRB Approval: The Ethical Committee of Ain Shams University's Faculty of Medicine exempted this study from IRB approval.

## Results

The demographic properties of the study population showed that 29% were males (20 participants) and 71% were females (50 participants). The mean age was 47.9 with a range of 33 years to 61 years. Participants represent medical schools and institutes from Afghanistan, Egypt, Iraq, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Sudan.

Thirteen of the participants had administrative positions, 38 were senior professors, and 19 were junior faculty. The leadership styles test was completed by 95.7% of participants.

The leadership styles test revealed that the sample was 68.7% authoritative, 62.7% coaching, 59% affiliative, 49.2% pacesetter, 43.2% democratic, and 10.4% coercive.

Seven CBPS were convened, and participants were requested to develop a thorough plan to sustain the curricular adjustments implemented in response to the COVID-19 study halt in their institutions, emphasizing the required leadership style for each step. The strategic imperatives for curricular transformation were established and classified into five main subjects based on CBPS and the designed plans:

### Theme 1: Understanding The Status Quo.

The assigned groups agreed on performing a situational analysis for the needs and the required changes in the curriculum, identifying the gaps in the curriculum, and deciding upon the best approach for the sustainability of the changes. The emphasis in this step was on creativity, collecting information, identifying obstacles, and considering alternatives.

Accordingly, most of the participants nominated the authoritative –goal-oriented leadership style for this stage.

To achieve this goal, they suggested the following steps;

1. Analysis of the reports, surveys, and focus groups obtained from stakeholders (students, faculty, administration, newly constructed digitization committee, e-learning unit, and online assessment committee) to outline the challenges of e-learning and online assessment.
2. Identification of different teaching strategies needed to cover the learning outcomes.
3. Evaluation of faculty's online learning competencies.
4. Evaluation of other communities of practice's experiences in various institutions.
5. Listing of the resources needed for sustainable implementation of the chosen changes:
  - Availability of IT technicians to overcome any expected obstacles.
  - Reliable internet bandwidth to sustain the demand on college learning platforms.
  - Skill labs with mannequins and virtual reality tools.
  - Updated learning management system (LMS).

Examples of participants' quotations:

“Identify what to change and how to change”

“Identify the constraints we faced to turn to online learning”

“Involving all stakeholders in a needs assessment”.

### Theme 2: Collaboration between Experts and Skilled Faculty

Participants decided that this stage needs an assemblage of expertise and viewpoints. The change team needs to encourage collaboration, integration, joint planning, and communication between departments.

They indicated that in order to receive the best results from this stage, they prefer to switch

between engaging and pacesetter leadership styles.

The participants suggested the following steps:

1. Creating a central change team of experts and motivated faculty members with leadership potential.
2. Establishing a virtual learning committee and assigning IT personnel to deal with IT problems.
3. Overcoming resistance through a three step strategic approach:
  - Endorsing inclusion.
  - Engaging and orienting students.
  - Building an interconnected work community.
4. Highlighting the pros and cons of similar experiences and presenting these to institution councils.

Examples of participants' quotations:

"Encourage staff development by joining in the global discussion on online-learning techniques."

"Purchase/update of current LMS system to suit the plans."

"Investing in updating the skill labs with mannequins and virtual reality programs."

### **Theme 3: Generation of Stakeholders Buy-In**

The change team must focus during this stage on building enthusiasm for the curricular changes among stakeholders (faculty, students, and administrators). All participants decided that the leadership approach that effectively manages this stage is the affiliative style.

They mentioned the following necessary steps to lead this stage:

1. Maximize the awareness of all stakeholders including students about the curriculum changes and required tasks through periodic meetings.
2. Encouraging students' contribution to the curricular changes by innovative ideas and taking their suggestions and recommendations into consideration.
3. Fostering a collaborative culture through periodic meetings with qualified expert staff in the field of medical education with

all faculty under the supervision of highly authorized administrative personnel.

4. Adoption of social constructivism learning theory to improve better collaboration among all stakeholders.
5. Building a consensus around the guides and instructions for the efficient Model of Practice of online learning curriculum through surveys or questionnaires.
6. Developing a well-planned faculty development program aimed at building staff capacities including, pedagogical, managerial, social, and technical skills.
7. Formulating students' guides for the new curriculum.

Examples of participants' quotations:

"Fostering a collaborative culture between teachers and administrators to create meaningful engagement on the curriculum reform."

"Holding seminars to clarify the urgent needs of the new plan to stakeholders."

"Encouragement of students' contribution to the curricular changes by innovative ideas."

"Creating an open channel of communication with students."

"Put expectations to encourage staff members and stakeholders".

"Make the change clear".

"Encourage staff development by joining in the global discussion on online learning techniques."

### **Themes 4: Preparation of the Curriculum Renewal Framework**

There was an agreement that the coaching leadership style is the most appropriate in effectively managing this phase.

To lead this stage, participants suggested the following steps:

1. Conducting focus groups involving expert faculty members to explore areas for further development.
2. Redesigning the curriculum to be delivered online: formulation of learning outcomes, selection of teaching methodology, and assessment strategies.

3. Regular communication with stakeholders for fine-tuning of the planned changes.
4. Regular follow up with the team leaders and empowering them to start implementing the change.
5. Foreseeing, detecting, and managing any obstacles and thinking of ways to solve them.
6. Preparing a final draft for the curricular changes and challenges to be revised.
7. Formulation of detailed e-timetables for all stakeholders
8. Celebrating small achievements.

Examples of participants' quotations:

"Scheduling periodic meetings to get preliminary feedback from the stakeholders."

"Preparing back-up plans for ongoing processes."

"Considering quality management in the whole educational process."

#### Theme 5: Monitoring and Evaluation

Action plan implementation requires careful monitoring and evaluation. Because it requires oversight, motivates individuals to continue working on the plan, and provides them with the support and motivation to do so, finalizing the plan calls for a democratic leadership strategy that is accepted by all groups. The following steps were specified by the appointed groups to cope with this stage:

1. Preparing progress reports on the ongoing curricular changes.
2. Getting feedback from all stakeholders.
3. Aligning with quality assurance and seeking both internal and external evaluation.
4. Sustaining the curriculum team through continuous motivation, support, and development.
5. Networking.
6. Regular fine-tuning of curriculum and teaching methods based on given feedback.
7. Preparation of a back-up plan in case of any problems encountered.

Examples of participants' quotations:

"Perception surveys for the stakeholders: faculty, students and health care providers to ensure better community outcomes."

"Build the implementation framework to allow for the reflection feedback cycle."

"Closing the loop."

"Regular discussion of feedback with reports conveying to higher management."

#### DISCUSSION

Depending solely on the charismatic leader does not guarantee the proper management of unpredictable and complex adaptive challenges like the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>10</sup>. Flexibility and flexibility, together with the capacity to take on more risks and sustain accomplishments, are necessary traits for a successful leader, particularly in conditions of unexpected change<sup>11, 12</sup>. Frequently, leaders address technical aspects of change but fail to estimate what it takes at each stage to accomplish that change. Băeau and Bejinaru (2013) described the most suitable leadership styles for the effective execution of each step of the change process<sup>13</sup>. Additionally, DeMatthews (2014) provided a protocol that integrates leadership theories with quality management methods for the achievement of an outstanding curriculum reform process<sup>9</sup>.

The work presented was a result of CBPS, which was carried out by 70 academic faculty members from MENA region colleges. Seven CBPS were held, during which participants developed specific plans for curricular change in response to COVID-19, as well as explicit rules for maintaining these changes and highlighting the required leadership style for each phase. The five key subjects of the strategic imperatives for curricular reform were understanding the status quo, collaboration between specialists and skilled faculty, production of stakeholder buy-in, preparation of the curriculum renewal framework, and lastly monitoring and evaluation. Participants also selected leadership styles that are most suited for effective administration and long-term sustainability of each stage of the change process.

As an initial response to the present research pause, all participants agreed to do a situational analysis for the needs and types of curriculum adjustments, as well as the identification of curricular gaps. Hanaysha (2016) remarked in the same context that the alignment of strategic changes vision with institutional aims and mission ultimately reassures all stakeholders that they grasp the situation and have a plan in place for problem-solving<sup>14</sup>. The participants nominated the Authoritative-goal-oriented style as the appropriate leadership approach for this stage. This style is characterized by inspiring and moving the stakeholders towards a common goal, identifying target groups, and dealing with context. To address the COVID-19 adaptation challenge, competent leaders must recognize the complexities of the pandemic's consequences, gather accessible data, and convey these complexities to all stakeholders while presenting possibly acceptable solutions<sup>10</sup>. They develop a sequence of triumphs and replace experienced professors in their reformed institutional environment as strategic future-oriented thinkers<sup>3</sup>. Additionally, they can successfully lead the transition to distance learning by exhibiting flexibility, tolerance, and compassion, which are crucial at this stage<sup>10</sup>. Furthermore, instructional leadership that incorporates elements of social justice leadership must be the driving force behind the initial phase of curriculum evaluation and revision. Therefore, in order to discover potential development areas, leaders must utilize their instructional leadership skills to collect and analyse a variety of data. Additionally, it is vital to rely on social equity theories to better assess how curricular reform affects students, boost staff engagement, and discover community supporters<sup>15</sup>.

According to Reardon, Reardon, and Rowe (1998), the ideal leadership styles during the planning stage of significant changes are both logical and inspirational<sup>16</sup>. Following the acceptance of the status quo, the participants agreed that the next stage is to plan for collaboration, integration, joint planning, and communication within departments. This is the capacitating stage, according to Reardon,

Reardon, and Rowe (1998), in which leaders must focus on clarifying the plan to the faculty involved in the execution efforts and assuring them that the chosen direction is the best, but it requires their engagement and commitment to be realized<sup>16</sup>. To get the best outcome of this stage, participants preferred to use the engaging and pacesetter leadership styles interchangeably. The engaging leader knows how to incorporate teacher leadership and stakeholder expertise into the curricular change. On the other hand, the pacesetter style can quickly achieve results and sets high standards for performance<sup>17</sup>. Previously, DeMatthews (2014) stated that during the second stage of curricular change, the leader must draw on the competencies of faculties to establish a developed degree of curricular reform and outcome<sup>9</sup>. Similarly, Kezar and Holcombe (2017) concluded that to achieve a pioneering impact in times of uncertainty, we need to implement distributed leadership in which leaders at different levels can go beyond the administrative limitations<sup>18</sup>. Furthermore, Nging and Yazdanifard (2015) found that in addition to the inspirational style, the logical and supportive leaders are valuable in the capacitating stage, as the logical leader develops outlines that illustrate the change, and the supportive leader helps the faculty to adapt to the new shift<sup>19</sup>.

Consequently, in the process of gaining stakeholders' buy-in, the change leaders must create a culture of collaboration and openness with staff members on the strategic plan of curricular transformation to online learning. The focus of the change-leaders should be the advancement of staff skills, reaching efficiently to all stakeholders, gaining the support of faculty, staff, and students to ensure their collaboration; in other words, putting them on-board<sup>20</sup>. The consensus groups agreed that the affiliative leadership approach is fitting to manage this stage because it is characterized by promoting and bringing people together, focusing on emotions, resolving conflicts, being open, and encouraging free and frank debates. The ability to engage and support stakeholders in the process will limit their worries and increase their willingness to offer



their time and energy <sup>21</sup>. During this stage, academic leaders must motivate faculty, especially the seniors, to change their mindset towards technology-enhanced teaching and encourage them to attend the required faculty development training courses <sup>22</sup>. On the other hand, attention must be given to the possible negative outcomes when relying exclusively on the collaborative leadership style, as Goleman (2000) found that sharing ideas between leaders and staff members may lead to endless meetings and less effective decisions <sup>8</sup>. The staff members become confused about the proposed problem. Some staff may even decide to refrain from participating, thus delaying the decision-making process. One of the central gains during this stage is the establishment of broader relationships that will foster confidence between students, faculty, and staff, and the institution <sup>23</sup>.

In order to prepare for the curricular framework renewal stage, new teaching, learning, and assessment strategies must be properly planned and announced to all stakeholders on time. According to Reardon, Reardon, and Rowe (1998), during the launch, leaders must meet set initial targets, produce early outcomes, and review achievements along the way. The consensus groups concluded that the coaching leadership method is the best way to effectively manage the change required in this phase. Instructional coaching leadership is characterized by mentoring all stakeholders and ensuring their involvement in the action plan. <sup>16</sup> According to Jensen et al (2015), instructional leaders are the ones who can define the institute's mission, drive the instructional program, and promote higher expectations <sup>24</sup>. Similarly, Liu, Bellibaş, and Gümüş (2020) recommended that instructional and distributed leadership principles can be applied to effectively manage the establishment of the framework of the new curriculum <sup>25</sup>.

While deciding the transition to remote education, the academic leaders must encourage faculty by providing essential training, support, and resources to them <sup>10</sup>.

Lastly, monitoring and evaluation of the implemented action plans are of great importance. This monitoring phase deals with unpredictable and uncertain situations. Undoubtedly, performance decline could occur due to the transition from one learning method to another. This stage must not be overlooked; it is essential to sustain the realized changes through supervising, directing people to maintain their efforts, and offering them the motive and support to do so <sup>26</sup>. As a result, adhering to the executed plan needs a democratic leadership strategy, as indicated by consensus groups, that may distribute responsibilities among all members, provide advice, and maintain balanced conversations. According to Kesting et al. (2016), inspirational and supportive approaches play a critical role in this stage since change maintenance requires a constant emphasis on input and involvement <sup>27</sup>. If people sense the negligence of their ideas, they will lose interest in making the change work. Also, Yasir et al (2016) stated that each leadership style plays a vital part in finalizing and sustaining the reform <sup>28</sup>.

As with the majority of studies, the current study's design was limited by the covid-19 crisis, which resulted in airport lockdown and global closure, so data collection was done through LISTSERV discussions with no face-to-face interviews or focus group discussions, which added some difficulties in communication with the study participants. Furthermore, there was little or no prior research on the study-specific topic of establishing a plan for curricular reform while emphasizing the leadership style required in each phase of dealing with the unexpected situation.

## CONCLUSION:

The unexpected impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on medical institutions offered exceptional obstacles because there were no pre-planned strategies for implementing new instructional modalities. However, due to the global nature of the crisis, leaders all over the world are confronted with identical issues. It is an excellent time for educational institutions to

work together on a global scale. A practical example is the current study's work, in which leaders and faculty from several countries established strategic imperatives for an efficient and durable curricular reform plan, as well as the necessary leadership styles to achieve each stage. Five imperatives are included in the curricular transformation plan. First, comprehend the current situation, which requires an authoritative leadership style with a minor commanding aspect. The second step is to devise a strategy that incorporates democratic, pacesetting, and commanding elements as needed. Third, a coaching approach is recommended to build stakeholder buy-in for an affiliate. Fourth, an authoritative style based on strengths-based knowledge is required to build a curriculum renewal framework. Finally, for piloting changes, a combination of all of the previously stated techniques is required, with a strong emphasis on transformational theory to distribute the experience.

As the speed and unpredictability of the crisis pose extraordinary challenges for faculty leaders; the flexibility of swinging from one leadership style to another according to the emerging situations is crucial for efficient handling of the crisis.

#### **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

- Building a hierarchy of competent leaders to maintain order and consistency.
- Leadership strategy and strategic planning awareness training for faculty leaders and staff members.
- Applying strengths-based leadership strategies in curricular change is crucial, especially during times of crisis.
- The exchange of expertise between institutions will reveal innovative attributes of effective leadership.
- Further in-depth studies with a mixed study design and the inclusion of a larger population might be required to reflect upon how our leadership style can affect our choices and decision making.

Limitations of the study: Shortage of recent articles discussing strategic imperatives.

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