

Exploring compassionate managerial leadership style in reducing employee stress level during COVID-19 crisis: the case of Nigeria

Compassionate
managerial
leadership
style

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Abstract

Purpose – This study explores how compassionate managerial leadership style can help to mitigate workplace stressors and alleviate stress experiences among employees — particularly in an extreme situation, such as the current global COVID-19 pandemic. The study's context is Nigeria's banking, manufacturing and healthcare sectors, which have a history of high employee stress levels.

Design/methodology/approach – Using a qualitative, interpretive methodology, the study adopts the thematic analysis process (TAP) to draw and analyse data from semi-structured telephone interviews with 10 banking, 11 manufacturing and 9 frontline healthcare workers in Nigeria.

Findings – It was found that a compassionate managerial leadership can drive a considerate response to employees' "fear of job (in)security", "healthcare risk" and concerns about "work overload, underpayment and delayed payment", which respondents considered to be some of the key causes of increased stress among employees during the current COVID-19 pandemic.

Research limitations/implications – The study is limited to exploring the relationship between compassionate managerial leadership and an organisation's ability to manage employee stress in the COVID-19 situation, using 30 samples from organisations operating in three Nigerian cities and sectors. Future studies may involve more Nigerian cities, sectors and samples. It may also possibly include quantitative combination to allow generalisation of findings.

Practical implications – In order to survive in extreme situations, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, organisations are forced to take drastic and often managerialist-driven work measures which can trigger high stress levels, low productivity and absenteeism among employees. Hence, organisations would benefit from implementing compassion-driven policies that are more inclusive and responsive to the workplace stressors facing employees.

Originality/value – Employee stress has been widely explored in many areas, including definitions, stressors, strains, possible interventions and coping strategies. There remains, however, a dearth of scholarship on how management-leadership compassion can help to reduce employee stress levels in extreme conditions, such as the COVID-19 pandemic — particularly in emerging economies.

Keywords Stress, COVID-19, Compassion, Managerial leadership, Nigeria

Paper type Research paper

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Introduction

The relationship between extreme environmental conditions and rising employee stress levels is attracting increased scholarly attention. This is due to the current COVID-19 pandemic crisis, which, aside from destabilising the workplace (WHO, 2020a, b), is also reinforcing (more than ever) the need for more effective leadership in work settings (Rosinha *et al.*, 2017). While a few studies have employed a number of leadership styles (including authentic, pain management, responsible and inclusive) as possible means of mitigating work-related stress (Gallagher, 2020; Mehta *et al.*, 2020), no study has (to the authors' knowledge) explored the imperative of a compassionate managerial leadership style in reducing employee stress levels, which often intensify during extreme situations, such as a pandemic crisis.

"Stress" generally describes any form of unpleasant emotional reaction that human beings may develop in, or outside of, the work environment, arising when they feel that they are facing a threat, of any nature, to which they have no adequate response, leading to anxiety and frustration (Seaward, 2019). For Kihara and Mugambi (2018), stress may stem from different stressors, including work overload, a work environment un conducive to health and productivity (Richardson, 2017), lack of engagement and inability to cope with work demands or to express grievances due to fear of layoff (Seaward, 2019). Broadly, the extant literature has explored the subject of employee stress globally in many aspects, ranging from definitions, stressors and strains (Kihara and Mugambi, 2018) to possible interventions and coping strategies (Yange *et al.*, 2016). Notably, numerous studies have been preoccupied with managing employee stress in extreme situations. For example, studies have explored employee stress management in a variety of military settings (including air, sea and land conflicts) as well as possible mitigation against the associated psychological effects that these extreme conditions may have on military personnel (Friedman, 2006; Jensen and Wisberg, 2014). In a situation involving extreme natural environmental conditions, Field *et al.*'s (2012) studies explained how adaptation options can be employed to manage stress in extreme water- and flood-related disasters caused by climate change. Similarly, Zhang *et al.*'s (2017) study explored stress testing frameworks for managing risk of landslides and extreme storms in China.

At present, numerous studies are concerned with the effective management of employee stress during the current COVID-19 crisis. Some authors suggest that this be done using proactive measures, including early support, aftercare attention, providing workers with clear messages and proactively monitoring and protecting their wellbeing and concerns (Greenberg *et al.*, 2020). Some studies have focused on strategies for a work-life balance through, for example, effective teamwork management (Tannenbaum *et al.*, 2021) and a model of moderated mediation (Dymecka *et al.*, 2020) as means of stress mitigation during COVID-19.

Others studies have placed leadership at the centre of effective employee stress management during a pandemic crisis, particularly in the contexts of authentic (Sultana *et al.*, 2020), pain management (Gallagher, 2020), responsible and inclusive leadership styles (Mehta *et al.*, 2020), among others. The integration of leadership quality in mediating employee stress during COVID-19 is thus advancing the stress literature (Rosinha *et al.*, 2017). To expand the research further, this study investigates how compassionate managerial leadership mechanics can help to reduce and minimise employee stress in the current crisis. This is explored from the perspective of the study's context, the developing country of Nigeria, whose employment terrain has a history of high employee stress levels (Oshagbemi, 2017; Effiong *et al.*, 2020). While contemporary workplaces are known to cause employee stress, the stress level is significantly intensified during extreme situations, such as COVID-19 (Rothan and Byrareddy, 2020). This is due to a number of crisis-related stressors, including poor work conditions and fears due to health risks and job loss. This requires compassion from those leading and managing the workforce (Kihara and Mugambi, 2018). Hence, in these sorts of

circumstances, an effective response to employee stress may rely on an approach that combines compassionate management and leadership — compassionate managerial leadership mechanics (Foster, 2017). This can promote organisational strategic goals (survival, economic sustainability) while also addressing employees' concerns (wellbeing, fear, uncertainty), through leadership compassion, benevolence, empathy, caring, engagement, reassurance and motivation (Peticca-Harris, 2019; Zhang *et al.*, 2020). Against this backdrop, the key research question that this paper hopes to answer is:

- (1) What does employee stress entail during the COVID-19 crisis, and how can an effective management-leadership mechanism help to reduce employee stress levels during such an extreme situation?

In response to this question, attention will focus on key stressors among employees as well as the leadership mechanism that can be instrumental in addressing these stressors and reducing employee stress levels during the current crisis in Nigeria. The study will adopt the qualitative-interpretive methodology and epistemology of social constructionism. Data will be gathered qualitatively and analysed using Pratt *et al.*'s (2006) pattern of thematic analysis procedure (TAP). The remainder of this study will be structured as follows: employee stress and organisational response; employee stress during the COVID-19 crisis; managing stress during COVID-19 through a compassionate managerial leadership lens; study context: Nigeria's employment terrain; methodology; findings; discussion and conclusion.

Employee stress and organisational response

Seaward (2019) defined stress as a chronic (and complex) emotional state created by biochemical responses in the human body and psychological reactions to environmental pressures, particularly where the individuals feel that they lack the resources to respond to such forces. Understood to be a global phenomenon, stress (which occurs in all facets of human life) mirrors a feeling of anxiety, tension and depression that permeates human endeavours (Kihara and Mugambi, 2018). Essentially, labour (or work) is considered to be a critical aspect of human civilisation; it can therefore be assumed to be a major stress factor among employees (Yange *et al.*, 2016). This assumption is not unconnected to the organisational pursuit of high productivity and profitability, which often drive workplace stressors such as work overload, work-life imbalance, poor work conditions, underpayment and absence of self-control of work patterns (Richardson, 2017). Furthermore, the absence of effective engagement between management (managers) and the workforce is a factor which is known to undermine employees' ability to understand their roles as well as cause them stress (Seaward, 2019).

While stress can present both mental and physical challenges to victims, individuals are affected differently: one employee's stress triggers may be different than those of another. Some of the factors highlighted in Kihara and Mugambi's (2018) study which can help to determine how well individual employees are able to cope with stress may include, but are not limited to, their skills, experience, age and level of confidence. This, according to Seaward (2019), explains the centrality of effective communication and engagement with employees in responding to workplace stress. In a survey conducted by the American Psychological Association (APA) between 2007 and 2010, the majority of respondents considered work to be a major contributor to employee stress (APA, 2010). Also, a survey conducted by the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EASHW) found that 22% of employees have experienced stress (EASHW, 2009). According to a British Labour Force Survey (LFS) conducted between 2017–2018, about 600,000 employees reported work-related stress, and over 57% (15.4 million) of all lost workdays was attributed to stress-related health conditions (HSE, 2019). A survey conducted in Japan between 2002 and 2007 indicated that over 65% of

employees are stressed in their workplaces due to work overload (Purnawati, 2013). Across the developing world, countries like Indonesia (Purnawati, 2013) and Brazil (Victor *et al.*, 2017) reported an overwhelming amount of work-related stress among employees. This was due to a range of managerialist-oriented factors, including absence of recognition of employee achievements, poor engagement and lack of development prospects.

Similar to those of other emerging economies, the rising cases of stress among Nigerian employees have been well documented (Oshagbemi, 2017). As people go through extreme levels of struggle to put food on the table, stress has become a regular part of life (Aderibigbe and Mjoli, 2018). The Nigerian populace experience stress due to poor quality in their basic needs and weak infrastructure, including — among many other (dis)services — poor healthcare services, epileptic power supply and long hours of traffic holdups due to bad roads (Oshagbemi, 2017). In addition to these stressors, Oshagbemi (2017) noted that Nigerian employees are further forced to endure the strain of oppression, work overload, underpayment, delayed payment, poor workplace engagement and even bullying — to mention just a few — all of which cause their stress levels to increase. While most developed countries (such as Germany, the UK, Canada and the US) have devised legally binding and practical mechanisms for responding to employee stress (Randma-Liiv and Savi, 2016), developing countries, including Nigeria, tend to only pay lip service to this requirement (Oshagbemi, 2017).

In general, some of the coping mechanisms adopted across most developed countries encapsulate a number of key steps, which include identifying and managing stressors and educating employees on how to deal with them (HSE, 2019). Also highlighted in the guidelines is the importance of ensuring that workers feel that they are being provided with enough resources (training, skill sets, etc.) to be able to cope with their role (Richardson, 2017). Furthermore, ensuring that employees are engaged, informed and involved in the process of designing their work pattern can be helpful in relieving work-related stress. Workplace stress can also be effectively managed when employees are able to celebrate their own successes and socialise with each other (Seaward, 2019).

However, in an extreme situation such as the current COVID-19 pandemic, in which employee stress levels tend to be exacerbated (Zhang *et al.*, 2020), effective adherence to these guidelines will require a managerial leadership approach that is compassionate to employees' concerns and wellbeing (Peticca-Harris, 2019), particularly in developing countries, which are largely plagued by poor leadership (Uchenwamgbe, 2013; Oshagbemi, 2017).

Employee stress during the COVID-19 pandemic

The new coronavirus, COVID-19 — whose official name is Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) — was first reported in December 2019 in Wuhan, the capital of Hubei province, China. While it was already declared an international public health emergency in December 2019, it was not until the 11th of March 2020 that the COVID-19 outbreak was declared a global pandemic (WHO, 2020a, b). There have been many conspiracy theories regarding how the virus broke out, with initial reports suggesting it was in the Wuhan seafood and wet animal market and/or a science laboratory within the same region. However, the Chinese authorities have refused to take responsibility for the outbreak (Rothan and Byrareddy, 2020; Lu *et al.*, 2020). According to WHO (2020a, b), COVID-19 is among a number of major types of corona pathogens that specifically target the respiratory system in humans, causing severe bronchitis and pneumonia. The world has already witnessed similar outbreaks, including the SARS-CoV and the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS-CoV), 80% of whose cases were recorded in Saudi Arabia (Al-Hazmi, 2016). The SARS virus broke out in the Guangdong province of China between 2002–2003 and was reported to have a 9.6% death rate (one in ten people) of the total 8,439 global cases, while the

MERS virus killed about 35% (one in three) of the total 2,519 global cases in 2012 (de Wit *et al.*, 2016; WHO, 2020a, b). According to the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE, 2020), while these figures indicate that SARS-CoV and MERS-CoV have higher fatality rates than the current COVID-19, the problem remains that COVID-19 has shown itself to be far more contagious.

Based on the statistics available at the time of writing this paper (WHO, 2020a, b), which are consistent with data from numerous other sources, the global number of confirmed COVID-19 cases stands at about 59 million, with the number of deaths at 1.3 million, which is why the virus has thrown the globalised world into a state of total panic and confusion (Hill, 2020). The known symptoms of COVID-19 vary among individuals. They include, but are not limited to, cold, cough, rough throat and headache — as well as mild, moderate and high respiratory difficulties (Rothan and Byrareddy, 2020). As the data largely suggests, those that are most likely to die from the virus are older people and individuals with underlying health conditions, such as cancer and diabetes mellitus, as well as chronic respiratory and cardiovascular diseases (Hill, 2020). With no vaccine yet in place to offer protection against the ravaging virus, the only viable option has been to slow down the spread by following sets of guidelines recommended by WHO (2020a, b). Given that the virus is largely transmitted through droplets from the mouth and nose (coughing, sneezing, etc.), WHO's (2020a, b) guide compels people to maintain (among other measures) social distancing (of at least two metres) and observe respiratory etiquette (such as coughing into a tissue or flexed elbow). To limit the spread, individuals with common mild symptoms are advised to self-isolate (i.e. stay at home) for seven or fourteen days if they have a body temperature of more than 37.8% (NICE, 2020). As the virus spreads across the globe, many countries have locked down schools, universities, sports events, public movement and businesses. This has further increased anxiety and fear (Zhang *et al.*, 2020). As businesses in particular have been affected by COVID-19, there has been a rise in the stress level of employees, whose concerns include (among others) job insecurity, layoffs, delayed payment and health risks (Hill, 2020).

Managing stress during COVID-19: a compassionate managerial leadership perspective

The concept of leadership has matured over many decades, yet it remains a complex phenomenon in practice. This is due to a number of challenges that may stem from the situation, the followership and the leadership characteristic. For leaders to be effective in their roles and manage the followership, they need to be able to understand the ever-changing situation on the ground (Clark and Harrison, 2018). The extant literature has captured the potentials and limitations of different leadership styles, such as authentic, pain management, transformational, transactional, responsible and inclusive leadership, among others (Gallagher, 2020; Mehta *et al.*, 2020). But it is essentially the situation that determines the leadership direction (Clark and Harrison, 2018). Effective management and leadership that incorporates compassion is ever-crucial in responding to employees' concerns, particularly in extreme situations (Gilbert, 2009) such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Rothan and Byrareddy, 2020), hence the proposition of a compassionate managerial leadership in this study.

First Delbecq's (1965) notion that effective management does not manifest in the absence of leadership, which explains why it is almost impossible to separate managership and leadership functions. While managers organise, direct, coordinate, execute and control organisational strategic directions, leaders influence and inspire followers with confidence, vision, trust and motivation, as well as driving their cooperation and discretionary effort, which are crucial in driving organisational success and long-term sustainability (Steers *et al.*, 2012). Thus, managers are considered missionaries whose focus is on the achievement of a set target, whereas leaders are considered to be visionaries with a focus on roles. Consequently,

managers think within the box of management, whereas leaders think outside of the box and live for tomorrow through building new relationships and structures (Khan *et al.*, 2015). All of these variables find expression in Drucker's (2006) contention that managership "does things right" while leadership "does the right thing"; hence, organisations need to strike the right balance between management and leadership — managerial leadership — to survive the ever-challenging business environment (Steers *et al.*, 2012). Thus, as managerial leadership combines the skills of a manager with the qualities of a leader, this elicits discretionary behaviour of followers, because it is the manager's leadership characteristics that make all the difference with regards to inspiring effective task performance, organisational effectiveness and human satisfaction (Martin and Heineberg, 2017).

However, a managerial leadership that is devoid of compassion for its followers may not be effective enough. This is particularly true in extreme situations (Hewison *et al.*, 2018) such as the COVID-19 pandemic, where employees tend to be more stressed than in normal situations due to extreme fears concerning health risks and job security, among other things (Hill, 2020). Understood to be an over-arching value, the concept of compassion (in the context of management and leadership) goes beyond sentimental pity for an individual and extends to carrying out empathetic actions that are aimed at relieving or reducing other people's suffering (Peticca-Harris, 2019). According to Wasylyshyn and Masterpasqua (2018), compassion embodies a range of variables that may include, but are not limited to, empathy, benevolence, care, understanding, support and concern for others. All of these are considered critical in both management and leadership practice, and they are therefore a key value for managerial leadership in times of crisis (Martin and Heineberg, 2017). A compassionate managerial leadership thus entails acts of love, care and selflessness that give meaning and purpose of existence to followers within the wider organisational context. For Gilbert (2009), being compassionate in the practice of managing and leading is all about creating an enabling environment and organisational culture in which providing support and helping to alleviate followers' suffering is not only acceptable but also normalised. Therefore, a managerial leadership that embodies compassionate characteristics will more than likely not only encourage employees to voice their concerns but also provide them with timely support in dealing with such concerns (Taylor *et al.*, 2011). Employees are in dire need of management leadership that is compassionate in style, to help them manage the rising stress level (Kelly *et al.*, 2017). This is particularly true in the current global COVID-19 pandemic, which is disrupting human lives both personally and, in the workforce, especially in developing economies such as that of Nigeria (Effiong *et al.*, 2020).

Study context: Nigeria's employment terrain

Often referred to as the most populous black nation in the African continent, Nigeria is best described as a collectivist society, with a population of over 190 million, comprised of about 251 ethnicities (National Population Commission of Nigeria [NPCN], 2017). Nigeria is endowed with huge crude oil reserves, as well as other natural resources; however, the vast majority of the people live in abject poverty and lack basic essentials, a situation which has generally been blamed on poor leadership and management of the country's affairs at all levels (Uchenwamgbe, 2013). This absence of effective management and leadership is also reflected in the country's employment sector, where employees lack governmental protection against unfair workplace practices and stressors, including exploitation, work overload and poor work conditions. These are exacerbated by rising unemployment, economic hardship and the concomitant stress caused to employees (Oshagbemi, 2017).

The employment issue in Nigeria is not unconnected to the dominance of the petroleum sector and the neglect of other sectors by successive governments. Besides the all-powerful petroleum sector, the banking, manufacturing and health sectors (involved in this study) also

play key roles in Nigeria's economic outlook. According to [Yange et al. \(2016\)](#), the manufacturing sector has remained stagnate and underdeveloped due to weak infrastructure, political instability, unneeded bureaucracy and corruption. [Oruh and Dibia \(2020\)](#) noted that the sector largely employs unskilled, low-skilled and untrained workers because the operators are less interested in training (or investing in skilled) workers. Despite these limitations, [Yange et al. \(2016\)](#) observed that employees are stretched beyond normal working hours in order to meet the unrealistic targets set by the management, which creates stress for the workforce. Similarly, the banking sector has also continued to endure a lot of challenges over many years ([Ajayi, 2018](#)). Following the liquidation of several banks in the 1990s, the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) took drastic measures to reposition the sector ([Ajayi, 2018](#)). This included a mandatory requirement for all banks to increase their minimum capital reserve from 2 to 25 billion Naira. This resulted in mergers and acquisitions, thereby reducing the number of banks from 89 to 23 ([CBN, 2019](#)). Though a welcome development, the reform also precipitated massive worker retrenchment, as well as aggressive work policies and other unethical practices that employees have to endure. These include, among others, work overload, long work hours, lack of quality training, absence of employee representation and engagement and enforcement of "no work-no pay" policies, which can make work very stressful for employees ([Ajayi, 2018](#)). The healthcare sector (which includes private, public and government hospitals) is regulated by the Nigerian Medical and Dental Council. However, it is not immune from the same poor work conditions that affect the banking and manufacturing sectors ([Oruh and Dibia, 2020](#)), causing medical professionals to migrate abroad for better career prospects ([Mushfiqur et al., 2018](#)). It is therefore undeniable that the Nigerian work environment is already stressful for employees. In the current COVID-19 pandemic, it is becoming even more stressful ([Effiong et al., 2020](#)). The sectors must therefore devise effective strategies for responding to employee stress, and central to such strategies is a compassionate managerial leadership.

As [Figure 1](#) demonstrates, an extreme situation (such as COVID-19) requires a combination of management and leadership, whereby managers should manage organisational strategic goals with compassion towards followers as well as lead compassionately through being flexible, engaging, understanding, caring, inspiring, supportive and motivating ([Wasylyshyn and Masterpasqua, 2018](#)). By practicing compassion, a managerial leadership can be effectively responsive to employee concerns ([O'Dea and Flin, 2003](#)) about job security, health risks, work overload, underpayment and delayed payment, which are considered to be some of the key stressors common among employees in the current COVID-19 situation ([WHO, 2020a, b; Zhang et al., 2020](#)).

Methodology

This study adopts the qualitative-interpretive methodology and epistemology of social constructionism. This, according to [Saunders et al. \(2012\)](#), enables researchers to gather and interpret raw data from people's lived experiences, which is germane to gaining nuanced understanding of the research phenomenon ([Patton, 2015](#)).

Data collection

The study relies on subjective judgement and a (non-probabilistic) purposive sample in recruiting a total of 30 respondents. The choice of a purposive sampling is informed by [Creswell's \(2013\)](#) contention, which assumes that qualitative researchers should be knowledgeable about their intended sample size and target samples. Using [Saunders et al.'s \(2012\)](#) guide, the researchers relied on referrals (from gatekeepers) and personal contacts to solicit respondents. The respondents were 30 managerial and non-managerial

employees working in the banking, manufacturing and healthcare sectors. The banking and manufacturing firms involved were located in Abuja, Lagos and Port-Harcourt, three major Nigerian commercial cities. In total, 10 respondents (33.3%) worked in banks based in Abuja, Lagos and Port-Harcourt, 11 (37.5%) in the manufacturing firms and nine (29.17%), from the healthcare sector, worked in two COVID-19 response centres in Lagos and Abuja. The sample is comprised of both genders. Respondents in the banks held different positions, including one middle line manager, a brand manager, an IT support technician, two sales officer and five floor cashiers. Respondents from the manufacturing firms included two operational managers, a branch manager, two sales managers and six ordinary employees. The nine respondents from the COVID-19 centres are all front-line healthcare supporters who were available and willing to offer their opinions, which were relevant to the study.

In line with [Patton's \(2015\)](#) guidelines for ensuring confidentiality, respondents were given pseudonyms: "Respondent 1–30". Respondent eligibility was based on set criteria, which include a minimum of one year's employment with the firms and an age range between 20–50 years. Prior consent was obtained from respondents and their organisations before the semi-structured interview was conducted, which lasted between 35–50 min. Instead of face-to-face interviews, the telephone technique was chosen, which, according to [Farooq and De Villiers \(2017\)](#), comes with inherent limitations, including inability of the interviewer to observe the body language and behaviour of the interviewees. On a few occasions, the interview sessions were abruptly terminated due to network glitches, forcing the researcher to call back the respondents later. If effectively managed, however, the telephone technique is cost effective and can be conducted remotely and quickly, helping to generate data of a similar quality to the face-to-face approach ([Novick, 2008](#)) while also fulfilling the COVID-19 requirements for social distancing ([WHO, 2020a, b](#)).

The interview adopted an open-ended questioning approach, which can enhance flexibility of discussion between interviewer and interviewee, in order to effectively explore, capture and contextualise the respondents' opinions in the findings ([Saunders et al., 2012](#)). Indicative questions covered in the interviews included, but were not limited to: what stress entails, common workplace stressors in normal circumstances and in the COVID-19 situation, the current coping mechanisms in both situations, and how employers can best manage and reduce stress among employees in the current situation. Following 24 interviews, the researchers concluded that the saturation point had been attained, but they went ahead with the last six interviews in order to ensure that there was no further information that could alter the study's findings. According to [Glaser and Strauss \(1967, p. 61\)](#), "saturation means that no additional data are being found whereby the sociologist can develop properties of the category".

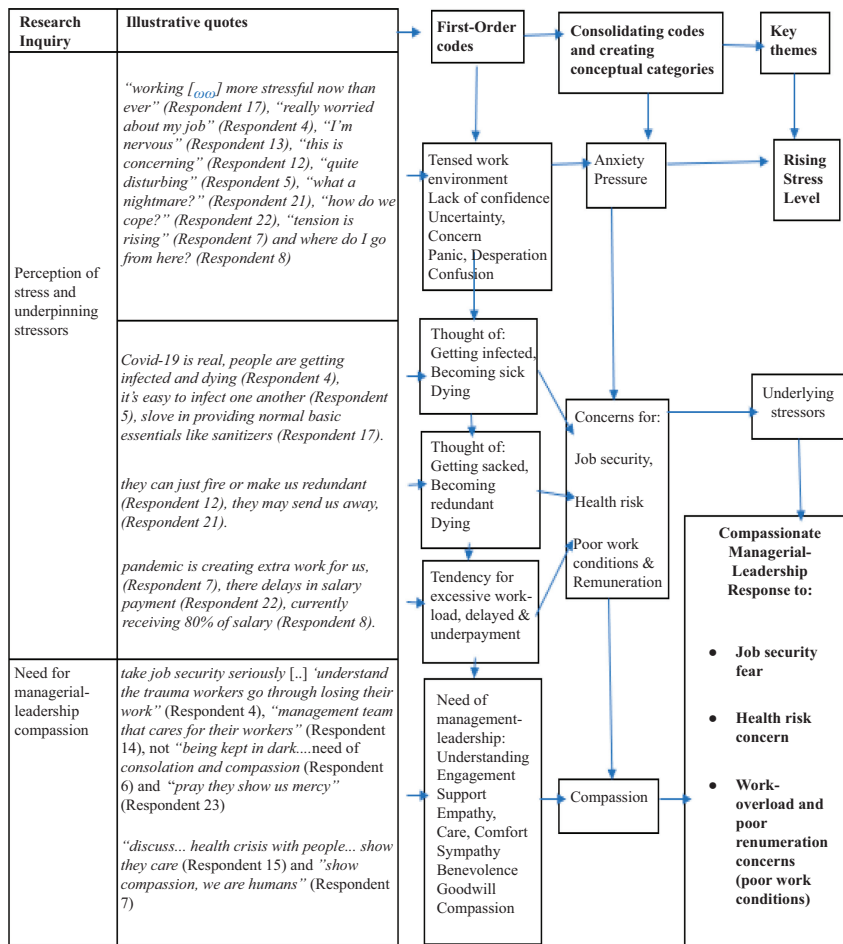
Data analysis

Following the interviews, data were manually transcribed and thematically analysed by iteratively moving back and forth between the datasets using TAP, a crucial analytical tool used for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns of themes in a qualitative study ([Braun and Clarke, 2006](#)). The process was operationalised via three key phases, following [Pratt et al.'s \(2006\)](#) pattern. The first step involved the use of first-order code to create a tentative category. This allowed the researchers to proceed with data reduction, open coding, textual content analysis and creation of terms that allegorically portray the salient, summative and essence-capturing features of the data, which directly respond to the study's enquiry ([Saunders et al., 2012](#)) (see [Figure 1](#) below).

Following [Miles and Huberman's \(1994\)](#) approach to qualitative analysis, the researchers recorded provisional categories that were established in data excerpts at every stage, using the contact summary sheet. For instance, some data excerpts were noted to relate to one of the

study's key questions, which was: "what does stress entail working in the current COVID-19 pandemic situation?" In response to the question, the researchers took note of provisional explanations within the data excerpts which suggest that employees not only have clear understanding of what stress entails, but are also currently experiencing high levels of stress. Using the same approach on the "what respondents view as the common workplace stressors in the current situation" question, the provisional responses suggest that employees are highly stressed due to fear surrounding job security, health risks and poor working conditions; they are therefore in desperate need of compassion and relief. (see Figure 1: illustrative phrases). The researchers proceeded with naming codes and constructing categories, which was followed by painstakingly reviewing the dataset to ensure that all essential notes, accounts and excerpts were appropriately aligned with their various categories.

In the second step, the researchers created "theoretical" categories through the consolidation of the "first-order codes" (Pratt et al., 2006, p. 240) that stemmed from the



Source(s): Researchers' findings (2020)

Figure 1. Qualitative procedure of data analysis

dataset based on the respondents' thoughts about what employers can do in response to the stressors that have been identified. The needs for reassurance, compassion, understanding, sympathy and empathy, among others, were largely suggested.

The third step involved consolidating the study's conceptual categories so as to establish a theoretical account for the reason behind the issue of enquiry. Subsequently, key themes emerged, indicating that the employees' perception of rising work pressure — due to the COVID-19 pandemic environment — would require organisational management to adopt a compassionate management-leadership mechanism in order to help reduce employee stress levels. The researchers nevertheless continued to cross-compare and validate conceptual categories until an agreement was reached on the final themes informed by the dataset (Braun and Clark, 2006). The themes are presented next.

Findings

Rising stress level – consequence of COVID-19-related stressors. Respondents generally acknowledged the worrying outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has taken the world by storm (WHO, 2020a, b). They also reported on the rising level of stress this phenomenon is creating among employees (Zhang *et al.*, 2020), particularly in the Nigerian work terrain, which has a history of undermining employee wellbeing (Otobo, 2016; Oshagbemi, 2017). Broadly, they expressed concerns regarding the tendency for their employers to capitalise on the pandemic chaos to deny them “assurance for job security”, “expose them to potential health risks” and subject them to “unfair work conditions”, all of which can increase their stress levels. As some respondents noted: “*I'm really worried about my job*” (Respondent 4), “*they may send us away*” (Respondent 20), “*I foresee redundancy anytime*” (Respondent 29) and “*they can just fire or make us redundant without pay, what a nightmare!*” (Respondent 12).

Beyond job security concerns, most respondents worried about their health and the risk of getting infected. This is particularly due to the Nigeria work environment, which often does not adequately carry out effective risk assessment or follow safety procedures (Otobo, 2016) such as the requirement of social distancing to prevent spread of the virus (WHO, 2020a, b); on the contrary, workplaces are largely over-congested. Some managers used optimistic tones, indicating that: “*these are still early days, the company is taking necessary steps to respond to the occasion*” (Respondent 1), “*our management team are working around the clock to address everybody's concerns*” (Respondent 25) and that “*supply for relevant protective kits are underway*” (Respondent 28). However, one front-line health worker countered, “*I had to buy my own masks from private dealers, because the ones they provide us here are believed to be substandard*” (Respondent 21). Similar opinions are expressed in the following excerpts:

We are squeezed together in this small office, it's easy to infect one another, quite disturbing (Respondent 5).

They have been slow in providing normal basic essentials like sanitizers, I'm nervous. (Respondent 13).

Mask and hand gloves should be accessible to all employees, but this is not the case. Working is more stressful now than ever (Respondent 17).

Respondents further expressed worry that they may be exploited by their management, who may capitalise on the chaotic nature of the pandemic to over-labour, underpay or delay their payment. Some of the extracts that exemplify this mood include:

Nobody really knows what to expect here, this time is precarious (Respondent 18).

We report to the office at normal hours and still take home one task or another. Tension is rising. (Respondent 7).

It is rumoured there may be delays in salary payment in coming months. How do we cope? (Respondent 22).

I'm currently receiving 80% of my already low salary. Where do I go from here? (Respondent 8)

The message that can be gleaned from the foregoing clusters, which is consistent with the literature, is that the economic, health and safety and social implications of COVID-19 can be phenomenal and unprecedented (Hill, 2020). Employees fear that some businesses may capitalise on the pandemic to pursue work policies and practices that are generally stressful and detrimental to their wellbeing. Short statements such as “working . . . more stressful now than ever” (Respondent 17), “really worried about my job” (Respondent 4), “I'm nervous” (Respondent 13), “this is concerning” (Respondent 12), “quite disturbing” (Respondent 5), “what a nightmare!” (Respondent 21), “how do we cope?” (Respondent 22), “tension is rising” (Respondent 7) and “where do I go from here?” (Respondent 8) are semantics indicating rising stress caused by the pandemic. With management-leadership compassion (Peticca-Harris, 2019), these stressors could be effectively addressed and minimised.

Compassionate
managerial
leadership
style

A compassionate response to employees' fear of job security and health risks

Unlike the developed economies — such as those of the European Union (EU), UK and the US — where effective and friendly labour policies exist for managing issues relating to job security and health risks at work (Randma-Liiv and Savi, 2016; Richardson, 2017), Nigeria is yet to demonstrate genuine commitment to implementing policies that will protect employees' wellbeing (Otobo, 2016). This is particularly true in the current COVID-19 crisis. Nigerian employers are often referenced for their managerialist employment relations practices and incessive dismissal of employees at will (Oruh *et al.*, 2019). Hence, due to the disruptive nature of the pandemic, it is far easier for employees to get sacked — and without any recourse to legal redress. As Respondent 3 advised, “*with hard work and obedience, management will certainly support workers within their humanely possible means*”, and for Respondent 26, “*it is essentially how well workers conduct themselves at this time that will determine how firms respond*”. Thus, employees are at the mercy of employers and can only hope that they show a little compassion to their plights. According to one respondent, “*in a normal world, employers take job security seriously, because they understand the trauma workers go through losing their work*” (Respondent 4). Similar emotive viewpoints are reflected in the quotes below:

I have children, wife and aging mother who depend on me to survive, and the way things are going, my job is not guaranteed. If only we had management team that cares for their workers, there may be some sort of hope. (Respondent 14)

How do I feed my family if I lose my work? How can I find another job in this critical time? They do not engage us about our job safety, we only hear from grapevine. They may just fire us overnight. I just pray they show us mercy. (Respondent 23)

The crisis is not going away any soon, so, it is likely they make us redundant. A colleague was made redundant last year without any supporting package. It may happen to us too. Rather than being kept in dark, we need consolation and compassion at this point. (Respondent 6)

In addition to job security concerns, respondents also expressed worry over health risks associated with COVID-19 infection. In countering this concern, some managerial respondents responded that “*we have always lived with viruses, so we need not over-hype the situation*” (Respondent 30) and “*you cannot stop working to escape virus infection, hunger can also kill*” (Respondent 27). Nevertheless, the majority of respondents believe that firms could do much better.

Everyone is at risk of contracting COVID-19. The company is yet to see any urgency in protecting workers. Truly, COVID-19 is a big challenge for businesses, but employees' safety should be paramount for managers. Least they could do is discuss this health crisis with people to show they care. (Respondent 15)

Constant hand washing is central to WHO's guideline for preventing infection and spread of the virus. We do not even have enough sanitizers. Business should be managed the same way as workers' feeling and wellbeing. They need to show some compassion, we are humans. (Respondent 7)

This is a highly contagious disease, which requires some degree of social distancing, but our office is too small to really observe this. I'm scared, they are not conducting any form of test to reassure people. I believe they need to be more sympathetic and humane. (Respondent 16)

As a front-line worker who supports COVID patients, you require safety kits, but there is severe shortage in this centre, some of us are using makeshift and substandard ones. Some patients admitted here since many days are yet to get tested, to know their fate. It is difficult to manage the situation; moral support is missing here. (Respondent 23)

As COVID-19 turbulence deepens across the Nigerian workplace and the imminent prospect of redundancy looms large, employees wish that their employers could at least show some element of leadership compassion in addressing and managing their fears. For instance, short statements such as *"take job security seriously . . . understand the trauma workers go through losing their work"* (Respondent 4), *"management team that cares for their workers"* (Respondent 14), not *"being kept in dark . . . need of consolation and compassion"* (Respondent 6) and *"pray they show us mercy"* (Respondent 23) suggest ways in which employees believe that the management-leadership team could show compassion and reduce their stress that is caused by fears related to job insecurity. Similarly, *"discuss . . . health crisis with people . . . show they care"* (Respondent 15) and *"show compassion, we are humans"* (Respondent 7) are some of the short statements indicating how respondents believe that a compassionate managerial leadership approach could help reduce employee stress arising from fears relating to health risks.

A compassionate response to employees' concerns about poor work conditions

According to the extant literature, work overload, underpayment and delayed payment (among other features of poor working conditions) are some of the common stressors identified among employees in workplaces (Oruh and Dibia, 2020). With the chaotic, destabilising and extremely demanding nature of the COVID-19 pandemic (Zhang *et al.*, 2020), the likelihood is that stress among employees will only intensify as employers pursue draconian measures to stay afloat. One of the managers in the manufacturing firms expressed frustration that *"some employees are only complaining about everything regarding work process rather than being patriotic in this challenging time"* (Respondent 14). Another manager admitted that *"the bank is really struggling to cope with the unusually increased number of customers visiting the site for help, but by any means, we have to continue supporting them"* (Respondent 39), which comes at employees' expense by subjecting them to an increased workload (Oruh and Dibia, 2020). The majority of respondents expressed concerns over perceived exploitation by their managers amidst the pandemic crisis. From the context of work overload, some respondents noted that:

My work-load nearly doubled since this crisis. I report to work every day and also work at home including on weekends. My boss believe we need to be proactive in covering many ground – in case we have to close down. I wish he could be more considerate; we are really stressed up. (Respondent 17)

Working in healthcare can be demanding, but supporting patients in the COVID-19 centre is extremely demanding and stressful. The processes of coming and leaving alone are just too strenuous. At the end of the day, they still want you to start cleaning up. The managers behave as though they have no human feelings. (Respondent 24)

In addition to work overload, respondents also perceive that they are being underpaid and, in some cases, they endure delayed payment. This is a bit cruel, especially considering the enormous increase in the amount and level of work which employees have to carry out in the face of the pandemic. In an attempt to play down such a contention, one of the manufacturing firm's managers quipped that *"unlike other firms, we are still paying employees a good percentage of their wages despite the fracturing condition facing the company"* (Respondent 10), which is a way of saying that employees should appreciate that the company is at least making some effort (Oruh *et al.*, 2018). However, for the majority of employees, this excuse does not suffice. Some of the quotes that exemplify this viewpoint include:

They reduce my pay by almost 20% first before notifying me. That is unethical. It shows you are not being valued. Where's the goodwill or support? (Respondent 8)

It took weeks before I receive my salary last month. It makes you feel like a nobody. They treat you like a beggar. Should they not be more sympathetic to our conditions — especially in a distressed moment like this? (Respondent 13).

Nobody is happy with the current work arrangements and incomplete or delayed wages, but better engagement and more compassion will reduce the stress this have on employees (Respondent 21).

Just as employees fear the possibility of losing their jobs due to COVID-19, so too do they express concerns that they are being exploited because of the crisis. This is both in terms of poor work conditions and low remuneration, which are some of the notable challenges employees face during the process of radical change (Al-Hazmi, 2016). As respondents submitted, while it is understandable that the COVID-19 situation requires an exceptional response in order to achieve organisational strategic goals, they also feel that the management and leadership team need to demonstrate compassion towards them by addressing concerns about work overload, underpayment and delayed payment, which can cause them stress (Oruh and Dibia, 2020). Short statements such as *"my work-load nearly doubled since this crisis. . . I wish he could be more considerate"* (Respondent 17) and *"extremely demanding and stressful . . . [show some] human feelings"* (Respondent 24) are some of the terms used by respondents to demonstrate how a compassionate approach to managerial leadership could be applied by their management to respond to employees' concerns (Peticca-Harris, 2019) over poor work conditions. Similarly, *"they reduce my pay by almost 20% first before notifying me. . . where's the goodwill?"* (Respondent 8), *"it took weeks before I receive my salary last month, should they not be more sympathetic to our conditions?"* (Respondent 13) and *"better engagement and more compassion will reduce the stress"* (Respondent 21) are some of the statements used by respondents to express how their organisations could apply a compassionate management-leadership model in responding to their concerns (Wasylyshyn and Masterpasqua, 2018) regarding underpayment and delayed payment, which would help to reduce their stress levels.

Discussion and conclusion

This study proposed that a compassionate managerial leadership approach can be adopted by organisations in an extreme situation — such as the current global COVID-19 pandemic — to respond to workplace stressors and crucially reduce stress levels among employees. Employee stress has been studied globally, examining the aspects of definitions, stressors, strains (Kihara and Mugambi, 2018), possible interventions and coping strategies, among

other aspects which aid the process of developing the concept further (Yange *et al.*, 2016; Seaward, 2019). However, there is a dearth of scholarship on how employee stress can be managed via management-leadership compassion in an extreme situation such as the current COVID-19 pandemic, which can cause extreme degrees of chaos and uncertainty as well as unprecedented demands in terms of both the existing workload and new procedures for managing health risks (WHO, 2020a, b). Focussing on Nigeria (the context), the study involves the banking, manufacturing and health sectors, which have a history of work-related stressors (exploitation, work environments unconducive to productivity, work overload), employee stress (Oruh and Dibia, 2020) and absence/inadequacy of effective management-leadership, which is crucial in responding to this stressful situation (Oshagbemi, 2017). In doing so, the study has (hopefully) made important empirical and theoretical contributions.

In the empirical context, the study demonstrates that employees' stress levels (caused by a managerialist employment relations practice [Oruh *et al.*, 2019]) can be exacerbated in extreme situations, such as the COVID-19 pandemic (WHO, 2020a, b). Data analysis points to a range of factors that are known to intensify stress levels among employees in extreme situations. In the first instance, employees (such as Respondents 4, 12, 21) expressed concerns over the security of their job, as employers may capitalise on the economic, health, social and safety implications of the pandemic to terminate their employment without due compensation and support. This presents a major stress factor. Secondly, due to the highly contagious, life-threatening nature of COVID-19 and the routinely poor attitude to healthcare in Nigerian workplaces (Oshagbemi, 2017), employees (such as Respondents 5, 13, 17) expressed fear over health risks. This was heightened due to the fact that the work environment features weak employment relations policies, poor regulatory systems and a desire to cut costs at the expense of effective risk assessment procedures, all of which result in the health, safety and wellbeing of employees being relegated to the back burner (Otobo, 2016). Thirdly, respondents worry that their employers may also capitalise on the chaotic, unprecedented and highly demanding nature of the COVID-19 situation to subject them to unfair work conditions, including work overload (Respondent 7), underpayment (Respondent 19) and delayed payment (Respondent 22), all of which can increase their stress levels (Zhang *et al.*, 2020).

In terms of the theoretical contribution, the study conceptualised a compassionate managerial leadership and proposed that such a mechanism could be deployed in an extreme situation, such as the current global COVID-19 pandemic (WHO, 2020a, b), to respond to key employee stressors (see Figure 1). In this direction, the study found that a compassionate managerial leadership mechanism can drive a compassionate response to employees' "fear of job (in)security", "fear of healthcare risks" and concerns surrounding "work overload, underpayment and delayed payment", which respondents considered to be some of the key workplace stressors for employees in the current crisis. Short statements such as "*work-load nearly doubled since this crisis . . . he could be more considerate*" (Respondent 17) and "*[show some] human feelings*" (Respondent 24) show employees' need for a compassionate response to work overload. Similarly, "*they reduce my pay by almost 20% first before notifying me . . . where's the goodwill?*" (Respondent 8) and "*it took weeks before I receive my salary last month, should they not be more sympathetic to our conditions?*" (Respondent 13) are some of the statements used by respondents to indicate how a compassionate approach to managerial leadership could help to address employee stressors relating to underpayment and delayed payment. According to Seaward (2019), stress is widespread in the contemporary workplace, but the degree and level can be exacerbated in an extreme situation, which can pose significant risks to employee health (WHO, 2020a, b) as well as impact negatively on organisational long-term sustainability (Zhang *et al.*, 2020). Hence, while organisations pursue strategic ends to survive in a turbulent situation such as COVID-19, they must also be

compassionate in their management-leadership role by engaging with employees, supporting and caring for them and showing them empathy, compassion and understanding of their plight at this challenging time (Gallagher, 2020). This can make all the difference in alleviating stress (Gilbert, 2009; Foster, 2017).

Compassionate
managerial
leadership
style

Recommendations, limitations and future research

According to Aderibigbe and Mjoli (2018), employee stress literature has matured over time, capturing the negative implications the concept presents for employees, organisations and wider communities. For employees, stress contributes to ill health and absenteeism, which results in low productivity and in turn, poor organisational performance. In addition, stressed employees often return home tense, leading to family disputes and other challenges, which often escalate across the society at large (Osibanjo *et al.*, 2016). Furthermore, in an extreme situation such as the current COVID-19 pandemic, stress levels tend to intensify among employees. Therefore, a more radical measure against related stressors needs to be appropriated to minimise the overall implications (Zhang *et al.*, 2020; Effiong *et al.*, 2020). Among the key stressors highlighted in the dataset are concerns over job security, health risks and poor work conditions (including work overload, underpayment and delayed payment). Although these challenges are difficult to eliminate entirely — particularly in an extreme pandemic situation — they could nevertheless be managed in a significantly better way with a compassionate approach to managerial leadership (Peticca-Harris, 2019). In order to respond to these stressors, the senior management executives (including the HR office) and fair employee relations enforcers in the Nigerian banking, manufacturing and healthcare sectors would be required to implement more effective regulatory and supervisory schemes, which would help promote a culture of compassion that is crucial in leading and managing employees in stressful and turbulent situations (Wasylyshyn and Masterpasqua, 2018). This would involve a compassionate approach to managerial leadership which pursues organisational strategic goals yet at the same time recognises the ultimate need to care for, engage with and support employees, as well as show them understanding, empathy and concern through strategising effective schemes to addressing their fears (the stressors) (O'Dea and Flin, 2003).

In this context, one programme that fits the policy description is the Australian “Champion of Change” initiative (Taylor *et al.*, 2011), which could be adopted across the three sectors to promote an inclusive work environment where the concerns of all employees are effectively taken into account. For example, employees’ fear of health risks could be minimised when they see that employers are prompt to provide protective kits (such as sanitisers, face masks and hand gloves) and implement social distancing procedures (WHO, 2020a, b). Likewise, fears over job security and concerns regarding poor work conditions could be reduced if employers would engage with employees to discuss these issues and possible ways of finding solutions (Peticca-Harris, 2019). Thus, such schemes should centre on a mandatory requirement for employers to protect employees to a reasonable degree against all kinds of health risks, unfair job loss and poor work conditions (including, but not limited to, work overload, underpayment and delayed payment) (Oruh *et al.*, 2018), stressors that are rampant among employees in extreme situations like COVID-19.

Although the study has made an important contribution by exploring the relationship between managerial leadership styles and organisations’ ability to manage employee stress during the COVID-19 crisis, it is also limited by a number of factors. We used 30 samples from organisations operating in three Nigerian cities and sectors. Future studies may involve more Nigerian cities, sectors and samples. It may also possibly include quantitative analysis to allow generalisation of findings.

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ER

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