

# WORDS MATTER: SCHOOL LEADERS' LANGUAGE IN THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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## ABSTRACT

As the coronavirus pandemic has affected all walks of life, education has not been an exemption; in fact, it is one of the most severely hit sectors. The unknown crisis created unprecedented circumstances for all participants in the education process, and school leaders have had a double job: to navigate their institutions and look after their employees. The latter is a pretty delicate task – they have had to keep doing business and running their companies while minding the language, since physical distancing necessitated the use of electronic communication, thus making room for vagueness and many misinterpretations. For this research, ten education leaders of private language schools and public primary and secondary schools in North Macedonia were video-interviewed on everyday COVID-19-related situations from their workplace context. Discourse completion tasks were employed as a data elicitation method. Being given the open-ended, only topically specified scenarios, the respondents were asked to recreate their language reaction to situations that really happened in their newest pandemic work life, recollecting the period since 16 March 2020. The interviews were transcribed, and the leaders' language choices were analysed.

The findings show that the leaders have been mindful about their words and have mostly chosen to use positive, calm, and encouraging language.

## KEY WORDS

COVID-19, business, education, leaders, language

## CLASSIFICATION

JEL: D23, D81, D83, I29, P36

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## INTRODUCTION

The deadly global pandemic has overwhelmed the whole world – physically, psychologically, spiritually, and intellectually. More than 100 million COVID cases have been recorded worldwide and, of those cases, more than 2,6 million people died. Those are not just ‘abstract’ people, but, as Erni and Striphas [1] state, family members, friends, lovers, mentors, colleagues, acquaintances, public figures, personal connections, and total strangers. Let alone the untold numbers of COVID ‘long-haulers’ whose bodies have been unable to overcome infection, so they endure protracted suffering; or the billions of people whose daily lives have been turned upside down and inside out socially, professionally, and financially. Social activities have dropped, frequent hand washing is exercised, and masks are worn. Erni and Striphas [1] argue that social inconveniences, frustrations (and anger) over lockdown orders and travel restrictions, confusion, separation and boredom characterise what we have been living through. And, according to them, mourning will be remembered as the primary way in which we have lived through the crisis. Remembering the horrific figure, what the world mourns is its existential vulnerability, and sensing and feeling this vulnerability is done through quiet, lingering sadness.

In such a melancholy and sadness caused by this unprecedented event in modern history, it is not only personal lives that have suffered, but, mapped into the business context, as Pejić-Bach [2] says the epidemic has strongly affected the economies of the countries all over the world, thus generating numerous challenges for many business entities; therefore, the experience of managing through it is not necessarily unique. In her Harvard Business Review article, Knight [3] cites Paul Argenti, a Professor of Corporate Communication in the Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth College, saying that in a situation of this kind the manager is to project confidence and strength.

As Perkins [4] says, throughout the pandemic, leaders have found themselves in positions they simply were not prepared for, managing teams through an evolving obstacle course of both professional and personal challenges. Simply, the pandemic has meant that all companies are affected by an event that threatens their stability and that of the business sector in which it operates, both nationally and globally, so business leaders have had to implement modifications to their corporate strategies and new organisational management models to face a new reality [5]. Besides taking the necessary health measures, the next most urgent reaction of the companies has been to technologically adapt to the new situation, since “quarantine has made video services, such as Skype, Zoom, and Google Meet become the primary way for communication with people outside of our households – family members, friends, teachers, students, business partners, co-workers, and clients. In brief, without video conferencing solutions, face-to-face communication would not be possible with people outside of our households.” [2], meaning that business could be done only virtually.

What Bonchek and France [6] state is worth emphasising and that is we can not pick our crisis. The first thing to know is that we need to expect the unexpected. They say that, according to Jamie Moldafsky, Chief Marketing Officer (CMO) of Wells Fargo, the first rule is that we do not get to pick our crisis, but we have to be ready. They also interpret Brian Irving’s thought, former CMO of Hampton Creek, whose opinion is that our crisis is not the one we think it is going to be. Therefore, it is very important to be prepared, stay positive and optimistic. The challenge is that by the time the crisis comes, it is often too late for many brands. Companies need to create a bank of goodwill when times are good, so that when a crisis comes, they are ready to speak up, reassuring critics and reinforcing their message.

Thus, communicating in the face of uncertainty is a constant leadership challenge [7]. It is an essential leadership skill, regardless of whether or not one has a formal leadership role. In fact, the ability to communicate through uncertainty is part of what demonstrates to others one’s leadership readiness.

Perkins [4] says that as we become more reliant on technology, personal communication has become increasingly important. The way leaders communicate with teams, and the words they choose are vital. And that is the case especially now, in a digital world.

Bonchek and France [6] claim that one might not be able to control what people say about the leader, but there is one thing a leader can control: himself/herself, meaning that a leader should choose a strategy and set an example for their employees. They cite Jamie Moldafsky, who says “A crisis is a crisis. It’s all about how you handle it. And that’s within every leader’s control.” Amy Friedlander-Hoffman advises to “get comfortable with being uncomfortable.” You have a choice. “You can come in every day trying to get your job done, frustrated that you have to keep putting out fires. Or you can realize that putting out fires actually *is* your job.” The lessons learned by executives who have weathered a crisis are relevant to anyone who finds themselves in challenging circumstances. All levels (including leaders) have to get better at overcoming obstacles, dealing with uncertainty, and staying focused in a changing environment. It is good advice for everyone to be prepared, stay true to their purpose, involve others in solutions, control what they can, and work on the underlying issues.

Hafner and Sun [8] say that leadership in a crisis involves a range of activities, such as making responsive decisions, communicating those decisions to the public, envisioning goals, generating trust and cooperation, and appealing for collective actions. As a result, effective communication plays an essential role in this process. As Baxter [9; p.13] claims, leadership is never a solo performance but jointly constructed.

In such a crisis, which has created unprecedented circumstances for all participants in the education process, school leaders have had a double job: to navigate their institutions, and to look after their employees. The latter is a pretty delicate task – they have had to keep doing business and running their companies while minding their language, since physical distancing necessitated the use of electronic communication, and instead of increasing and improving communication, it actually made room for void in communication, vagueness and even misinterpretations. Being scientifically challenged to investigate the situation in our country, that is, to see how leaders in R. North Macedonia talk to their employees and how or whether they navigate them in this challenging pandemic, we have conducted research that centres around two hypotheses. Namely, we make the following research propositions:

**RP<sub>1</sub>:** during the COVID-19 pandemic, leaders have been mindful about their use of language, and

**RP<sub>2</sub>:** in the pandemic circumstances, when interacting with their employees, leaders use more positive, encouraging than negative, reprimanding language.

As far as methodology is concerned, ten education leaders of public primary and secondary schools, as well as from private language schools in North Macedonia have been video-interviewed on everyday COVID-19-related situations from their workplace context. Discourse completion tasks (DCTs), a tool mainly used in linguistics and pragmatics to elicit particular speech acts, have been employed as a data elicitation method. They are a one-sided role play with a situational prompt, whereby one participant elicits the responses of another participant. This instrument was originally developed by Shoshana Blum-Kulka, who, based on the work of E. Levenston, used it to study and compare speech act realisation between native and non-native Hebrew speakers [10]. As the DCT consists of a scripted dialogue that represents various scenarios and is usually preceded by a short prompt describing the setting and situation, we have chosen to use it for the purpose of our research. Namely, being given the open-ended, only topically specified scenarios, the respondents are asked to recreate their language reaction to situations that have really happened in their newest pandemic work life, recollecting the period since 16 March 2020. The interviews have been transcribed and the leaders' language choices have been analysed.

Drawing upon the literature sources on the topic of using language in the leader-employee interaction, further in the text we analyse the language that our interviewed school leaders have used in the most common everyday situations, such as thanking and reacting to one's good performance that usually requires praising, but also in rather sensitive while equally realistic occasions such as apologising and reacting to one's failure.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### LEADERS' LANGUAGE IN COMMUNICATION

When teaching leadership, Panayiotou [11] gives a non-textbook definition of leadership by relying on a famous quote by the 6th century Before the Common Era Chinese philosopher, Lao Tzu: "A leader is best when people barely know he exists, when his work is done, his aim fulfilled, they will say: we did it ourselves."

Speaking of the importance of communication and language in a leadership context, King [12; p.1205] says "managing is about talk," where the power of language through "its ontological capacity [structures] our actions in the context of perceived realities". Conger [13; p.31] maintains that "effective leaders [are] skilful craftsmen of their organisation's mission [and] communicate their missions in ways that maximise their significance." In his study of powerful international leaders and statesmen such as Margaret Mead, Martin Luther King, Margaret Thatcher, and Pope John XXIII, Gardner [14; p.22] writes about the cognitive and cultural elements of leadership that reside in the minds of leaders and in their work cultures. This approach deals with the stories and struggles that constitute a leader's mission in life.

Ling and Guo [15] say: "Leadership is a language game." According to the theory of motivating language, leaders can motivate and inspire their subordinates through their oratory skills. The motivating language used by leaders powerfully influences the leader-follower interactive process as a result of its role in establishing followers' relational and psychological states, including their work motivation. The choice of words used by leaders is one of the most effective strategies for instilling a perception of their credibility and trustworthiness within employees. For an effective leader-follower interaction, leaders should create an inclusive work environment, which requires them to be educated on how best to hold conversations in productive and thoughtful ways. They cannot provide the proper support if they do not understand their employees' needs. What is more, if performance messaging is not delivered in ways that can be received effectively, then business results, along with employee performance and moral, will inevitably suffer. Therefore, leaders need to listen and be curious [16].

In that interaction, the power of language should not be underestimated, since words can paint a picture. And everybody should think before talking, think what they are going to say, especially if it is an emotive or potentially confrontational subject. A real and authentic language will help form a stronger bond of trust, and if the others (followers) trust the leader, they will feel safe in the company and will follow the leader. To achieve this, leaders should marry language with action – not only to say the right words, but to mean them, that is, to follow them by behaviour and action [5].

Schwartzberg [17] emphasises that the leader's use of weaker words diminishes a leader's impact, thus, our interpretation is that in order to be seen as a figure of integrity, they should plan how to construct their messages.

As Gallo [18] points out, throughout much of human history, leaders have relied on their words to spark action. And many economists and Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) today swear that words are the most important tool in a world where "command and control" leadership has given way to power by persuasion.

In his Harvard Business Review article, Gallo [18] cites the Nobel economist Daniel Kahneman, who says: “If you care about being thought credible and intelligent, do not use complex language where simpler language will do.” Effective leaders speak in simple language and simple means short. Thus, short, effective and situation-targeted language should be used, since the clearer and more concise the leader is, the better the chances of the leader getting their message across and persuading people to act on it. Thinking about how to share the next message, it should be remembered that language influenced by the Anglo-Saxon period has been used by many great leaders. Gallo [18] cites Winston Churchill who once said: “The shorter words of a language are usually the more ancient. Their meaning is more ingrained in the national character and they appeal to greater force.” In a memo titled “Brevity,” he urged government administrators to replace long “woolly phrases” with single conversational words, pointing out that brevity equals clarity and that directness makes things easier to understand. In line with this urge, but in the current situation, a very popular person is Dr. Anthony Fauci, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease at the National Institutes of Health, who is widely admired for his straight talk and steady demeanour. Cable News Network (CNN) has called him “a public force”, who translates complex medical information into everyday language. His strategy is: “You don’t want to impress people and razzle-dazzle them with your knowledge,” Fauci says, “You just want them to understand what you’re talking about.” Since, like a virus, words are infectious. They can instil fear and panic or facilitate understanding and calm. In the given, pandemic context, calm and understanding are needed, so words should be chosen wisely.

Leaders use empathetic language to express compassion and humanistic emotions as well as to demonstrate their trustworthiness and provide their employees with psychological support, thereby improving their social bonds and identification with the organisation. What a leader says can convey empathy and emotional support to their subordinates, which in turn can enhance subordinates’ job satisfaction and performance.

Mayfield and Mayfield [19] emphasise that a “leader must walk the talk”, meaning that he or she must convey integrity, where actions correspond to intentions and words. They especially emphasise the fact that the use of motivating language is closely connected with the followers’ decision-making and their job performance. Leaders who engage in motivating language (e.g., empathetic language) establish close emotional connections with their subordinates, inducing a high level of affective trust that fosters a feeling among employees of being respected and cared for by the leader. As a result, subordinates will then reciprocally engage in more proactive behaviours that are likely to have beneficial outcomes for the organisation. Through close interactions with subordinates, leaders are able to build an active environment wherein followers feel safe and comfortable and are willing to work proactively above and beyond the scope of their duties. As a matter of fact, according to previous studies, harmonious interpersonal relations and a supportive atmosphere can foster employees’ proactive behaviour.

As García-Sánchez et al. [5] maintain, positive words such as ‘help’, ‘support’, ‘confidence’, ‘commitment’, ‘improve’, ‘advantages’ instil the followers’ positivity and security in their leaders. It can be concluded that such language choices make the employees trust their superiors and feel secure at their workplace. Likewise, when referring to negative discourse, leaders usually use softer negative words, such as ‘stop the spread’, ‘vulnerability’, ‘protect’ and ‘promote a safe and healthy workplace’.

Knight [3] says that the leader’s goal is to be the person the workers turn to for guidance and direction. The leader should look at the situation from the workers’ perspective and think about what they themselves would like to hear. Therefore, a use of rousing language is very important, which will show a belief, instil enthusiasm and hope, and convey strength. As

Argenti is cited by Knight [3]: “leaders need to understand their team members’ individual worries and stresses”, that is: “You cannot manage other people’s emotions; all you can do is minimise the fear they have”. In the current situation, because most employees are working remotely, leaders cannot rely on hallway conversations and there aren’t enough Zoom meetings to make up for what’s lost when your team is not physically together. Therefore, check in with the team on a regular basis is needed to get a handle on “where people stand.” Leaders need to listen carefully to what people are asking and saying, and since most people need to hear they are going to be OK, they should be given “every reassurance”.

The importance of empathetic language is stressed by Binyamin and Brender-Ilan [20], when, in line with what has been written before here, they say it is used to establish human connectedness and bonding with workers through genuine consideration. Leaders can instil work with meaningfulness by prompting employees to transcend their personal needs or goals in favour of those tied to a broader mission or purpose or by encouraging them to explore and recognise new elements of their work. By using empathetic language, they enhance interpersonal relationships with their employees through verbal expressions of emotional support, praise for good performance, and human bonding. When employees interpret leaders’ speech acts and conversations as increasing their autonomy, competence, or relatedness, they feel that their basic human needs are met, and this may stimulate their feelings of energy. Actually, when they feel more meaningfulness in work tasks, they will be intrinsically motivated and thus more energised and vitalised to engage in their work.

Hafner and Sun [8] go on to describe the kind of balancing act required of leaders in a crisis, noting: “a leader is meant to perform a demeanour of courage and confidence in contexts of extreme uncertainty but, at the same time, may be expected to display authentic vulnerability without appearing weak” [8; p.365].

In this context, talking about leaders, Knight [3] says: “It’s okay not to have all the answers”, meaning that what matters is to be empathetic and sensitive to the employees’ concerns. The former Australian PM Julia Gillard suggests that Ardern’s leadership presents a novel approach. In particular, she comments that Ardern is “leading in a different style” and “leading with kindness and empathy at the foreground”.

### **FEMALE LEADERS’ LANGUAGE (IN A CRISIS)**

Namely, speaking of leaders’ language and emphasising the importance of their emphatic language, Panayiotou [11] refers to a *Forbes* article that asked what countries with the best coronavirus responses have in common and the answer is that their leaders are female. From Germany’s seasoned chancellor Angela Merkel to Finland’s young and newly elected Prime Minister Sanna Marin, female leaders who are only 7 % of world leaders seem to have done a better job, on average, in dealing with the pandemic, regardless of a difference in specific tactics: Chancellor Merkel relied heavily on science; New Zealand Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern, led with what she called a “kindness first approach.” There is statistics from *The Telegraph* on April 28, 2020, which documented that female-led nations had significantly fewer deaths, and these facts of better leadership exercised by women can be connected with our research as 80 % of our interviewees are women, which can be (in)directly linked with the use of positive, soothing language.

In a *Different Voice*, Gilligan [21] argues that women’s sense of morality is based on relationships and feelings of care and responsibility toward others.

Sherman [22] noted a pattern of common traits in all female leaders listed above: humility and a willingness to consult experts; ability to understand one’s community and empathy; willingness to ask questions and to have their decisions questioned and, if necessary, altered

with a new turn of events; high emotional intelligence and ability to set targets that inspire; ability to negotiate, not for the self, but for the common good; and skilled in being able to operate horizontally and to build community.

The biggest rationale behind this might be that women who have gotten to these top positions have most likely worked extremely hard to get there – given the prevalent sexism in politics – and therefore carry with them a unique repertoire of skills. Following a seeming psychoanalytic perspective, it is said that “maybe there is something that goes all the way back to our childhood, (relating to) who we go to with a scraped knee”, who we go to when we are in pain or have ill health. These figures are typically female, oftentimes a mother or a school nurse.

This opposition in the leadership style between male and female political leaders, which we connect with our business leaders is also seen in Boris Johnson’s apparent absence from the handling of the pandemic. His absence has been risky, sending a message that he “does not care,” triggering “especially powerful anxieties about betrayal and abandonment” and a perception that he is not carefree but rather careless [23]. Tomkins [24; p.3] actually makes a distinction between Johnson’s dubious style and Ardern’s combination of “empathy, emotional resilience and efficiency (which seem) to crystallise what it means for leaders to embody and enact care”. Agreeing with Ciulla [25; p.3] that “the job of a leader includes caring for others or taking responsibility for them”, Tomkins also notes that being present is crucial to both accomplish and show this care. Since care is not just about the self; it is about active involvement with others.

Unfortunately, leadership is a highly gendered phenomenon, as French and Webster [26; p.46] write: “Women constantly walk a tightrope of inclusion and exclusion.” in which they are constantly judged by masculine standards. In this context, female leaders have typically shouldered the burden of hiding their femininity and/or what could be perceived as traditional or stereotypical female behaviour.

Yet, what we have seen during the pandemic – and what the media and the business publications mentioned have picked up on – is that it is precisely these traditionally feminine characteristics, such as empathy, compassion and care, that have led to the most effective coronavirus responses. In fact, to go a step further, some female leaders have not only negated the aforementioned “binds” but also worked successfully within the maternal archetype, therefore potentially up-turning traditional media perceptions of leadership.

Johnson and Williams [27] say that male politicians commonly depict themselves as strong leaders who will protect their citizens from both internal and external threats while promising economic security. This can be seen as a form of protective masculinity, in which male leaders draw on traditional conceptions of the male head of household and breadwinner who protects and cares for their family to suggest that they have the necessary masculine characteristics to protect their nation. For example, Donald Trump depicts himself as the strong alpha male who will defend Americans from threats such as undesirable immigrants and the loss of jobs overseas to “make America great again.” By contrast, protective femininity draws on forms of protectiveness, often incorporating caring and empathy and, associated with women’s role in the family, to suggest that women politicians have feminine characteristics that will facilitate their looking after citizens.

It is traditionally mothers, not fathers, who look after sick members of the family. It is traditionally mothers who take charge of household hygiene and ensure that children and recalcitrant males wash their hands. Finally, it is also women who are traditionally caring and empathetic in times of trauma. Thus, like so many other women political leaders, Ardern is depicted as providing the maternal comfort that we seek when we are ill—the one to comfort us and lessen our anxieties.

Ardern urged New Zealanders to be kind and caring; the Norwegian prime minister, Erna Solberg, held a press conference specifically for children, empathising that “many children are finding this

scary” but gently explaining the measures taken to protect their families. Merkel, nicknamed “Mutti” (Mommy), in a video from 2020, also expressed compassion for how painful social distancing and isolating the elderly would be, because in hard times: “We show affection by staying close, and by reaching out to each other. But at this time, we must do the exact opposite.”

Meinecke and Kauffeld [28] maintain that previous theorising and research have repeatedly highlighted the important role of leader empathy as a main driver of successful leader-follower interactions.

There has been considerable debate in the literature on whether empathy is mainly an affective or cognitive phenomenon. The affective view on empathy emphasises the notion of empathy as an emotional response, such that empathy encompasses the ability to share or experience another person’s feelings or emotions, while scholars following the cognitive view on empathy, on the other hand, explained that empathy is a person’s intellectual understanding of another person’s internal state.

More specifically, we define leader empathy as a leader’s ability to accurately recognise and understand the emotional reactions and feelings of their followers. This understanding, in turn, helps leaders to respond appropriately to the needs of their followers and to craft an appropriate (emotional) response. Generally, leader empathy is perceived as being central for managing social relations because empathic leaders are said to be more effective at managing the emotions of their followers. Consequently, it is a common theme in the leadership literature that leaders who are skilled at identifying and responding to follower emotions are also more effective leaders.

For example, it has been argued that leaders who are more attuned to their followers’ emotions are better able to spark enthusiasm in their followers, to develop collective goals and objectives, and to promote flexibility in decision-making and change. In addition, leader empathy has been related to higher ratings of transformational leadership, employees’ well-being, and ratings of leadership performance. Results from a recent large-scale survey [29] further showed that employees themselves value leader empathy and see it as an integral component of the workplace. More than half of the participants stated that they would even accept a pay cut to work for an empathic employer. In sum, these findings provide support for overall positive effects of leader empathy in the workplace. In order to achieve successful conversations, we argue that leaders must be able to not just feel or experience empathy but to craft empathic responses. Leaders’ expressions of empathy are associated with a higher ability to manage follower emotions. It is an inevitable fact that empathy is an important social construct that can create bonds between individuals or build barriers when empathic behaviour is not presented at the appropriate times, and women tend to have better empathy than men. Drawing on the political leaders’ behaviour, we can transfer this similarity in a business context, recognising that a “caring leader” is one who offers personalised attention to their followers and is willing to go beyond the call of duty in dispatching his or her responsibilities. And, the best, most easily seen and immediately felt way of showing attention and responding to somebody’s (in our case, employees’) needs is through the use of (emphatic) language.

Following this train of thought, Stillman [30] discusses the difference between ‘*nice*’ and ‘*kind*’ by saying that it is not a bad thing to be polite and avoid unnecessarily ruffling feathers, but being nice does not go very deep. It is a smile and hello without any action (or maybe true feeling) to back it up, while kindness helps. Choosing kindness over niceness is even more important in our current moment when so many are suffering due to Covid-19. Mainly, because aiming for niceness pressures others to project positivity they may not feel. Far better, to choose your words carefully so people can be open about how they are really doing if they so desire. We are all grouchy at the moment and straining for nice all the time is too much to ask.

Furthermore, research shows that kindness helps the giver as much as the receiver. Helping others boosts happiness and resilience when we need joy and strength the most. Kindness runs deeper and is way more valuable; therefore, if we need to choose between niceness and kindness, we should always aim for kindness.



Finally, every crisis is a change, and to facilitate change, Fullan [31] says that “leadership is the lever to promote deep change”. He stressed: “Change is an intricate, complex, and emotional process that arouses emotions and when motions intensify, leadership is key” [31; p.1]. Heifetz and Linsky [32] are also cited in promoting leadership behaviour as a strong factor in response to change. They stated: “To lead is to live dangerously because when leadership counts, when you lead people through difficult change, you challenge what people hold dear – their daily habits, tools, loyalties, and ways of thinking – with nothing more to offer perhaps than a possibility” [32; p.2].

## **SCHOOL LEADERS' LANGUAGE**

Talking about school leaders, an empirical study commissioned by the Wallace Foundation called *How Leadership Influences Student Learning* is commented by Leithwood, et al. [33] who found that “Without a powerful leader, troubled schools are unlikely to be turned around”. This study says: “Many other factors may contribute to such turnarounds, but leadership is the catalyst” [33; p.7]. In fact, in a crisis moment that calls for a change, transformational leaders are those who are needed as they are “recognised as change agents who are good role models, who can create and articulate a clear vision for an organisation, who empower followers to achieve at higher standards, who act in ways that make others want to trust them, and who give meaning to organisational life. It was teachers' commitment to change that was indirectly and directly impacted by transformational leaders.

Dvir, Eden, Avolio, and Shamir [34] state that transformational leadership positively impacted staff motivation, commitment, and empowerment. Also, Marks and Printy [35] found that transformational leadership blended with instructional leadership positively influenced overall school performance.

As Leithwood et al. [33] claimed: “Today, principals and superintendents have the job not only of managing our schools, but also of leading them through an era of profound social change that has required fundamental rethinking of what schools do and how they do it. This is an assignment few sitting school administrators have been prepared to undertake” [33; p.5]. These authors also declared that: “At the core of most definitions of leadership are two functions generally considered indispensable to its meaning: setting directions and exercising influence” [33; p.1].

Teachers and students held greater organisational commitment when they worked for a transformational principal, thus, Marks and Printy [35] found that transformational leadership positively influenced school performance, when measured by student achievement and quality of teacher instruction.

In fact, transactional leadership represented everyday interactions/exchanges between manager and follower, whereas, transformational leadership “referred to the process whereby an individual engages with others and creates a connection that raises the level of motivation and morality in both the leader and the follower” [36; p.170].

## **LANGUAGE SITUATIONS**

Talking about apologies, the form ‘sorry’ is analysed as prototypically associated with them – a speech act that has been described as “perhaps one of the most ubiquitous and frequent ‘speech acts’ in public discourse and social interaction” [37; p.1]. It is thus a speech act that we use and encounter regularly in our daily lives, which is mainly due to its importance on a social and cultural level as well as its association with polite language use. An apology implies that some wrongdoing has occurred which results in a breach of social and cultural norms and requires remedial action. By apologising, the speaker acknowledges the offence, takes responsibility for it and expresses regret.

Van Hooijdonk and Liebrecht [38] regard an apology as an acknowledgment of (the responsibility for) the dissatisfying event and can include an expression of regret.

Along these lines, Tucker et al. [39] cites Aldous Huxley: “If you have behaved badly, repent, make what amends you can and address yourself to the task of behaving better next time.” Ethical leaders do not deny their mistakes, but they apologise, make amends, and take steps to avoid repeating transgressions in the future. Indeed, some popular writers have recently argued that apologising is a prerequisite for high quality leadership. For individuals in leadership positions, research evidence is beginning to suggest that apologies are critical in rebuilding and sustaining long-term relationships. The general impression is that apologising following wrong-doing will positively influence leadership perceptions. In particular, leaders who apologise will be perceived as looking beyond self-interest for the good of the relationship, thus embodying many elements of transformational leadership (i.e., inspirational motivation, idealised influence, intellectual stimulation, and individualised consideration). Finally, in an apology, the transgressor both admits the act was wrong, accepts responsibility for the offence, expresses empathy, offers penance, and promises not to repeat that behaviour in the future.

When a leader apologises, the followers view the leader’s behaviour as a socially responsible reaction to wrongdoing. A sincere apology signals vulnerability and transmits moral meaning, allowing the repair of interpersonal relationships to begin. As complex speech acts, apologies have a range of positive effects, including generating forgiveness, restoring trust, reducing aggression, enhancing future relationship closeness, and promoting well-being.

Up to now, there have been no studies which directly examine how followers perceive leaders who account for their mistakes with apologies, but it is believed that they can play an important role in developing and repairing leadership perceptions in organisations, and ground this prosocial orientation in transformational leadership theory.

When individuals perceive their leader is fair based on the way he or she behaves (e.g., apologising), they are likely to believe their leader engages in those behaviours willingly. Then, leaders who apologise will be seen as doing so because they care for the individual and the relationship, which reflects individualised consideration, another integral component of transformational leadership. Mistakes, wrongdoing, and other unusual situations are critical moments that attune followers to the behavioural intentions of their leaders.

First, apologies demonstrate idealised influence, by emphasising the importance of behaving in an ethical manner and taking responsibility for one’s actions. As Mills [40] suggests, leaders are “humanised by apologising in a way that a wrongdoer who remains silent and appears indifferent to public opinion is not”. Second, apologies also show caring for the employee and the leader-employee relationship, exhibiting individualised consideration.

But, it is equally essential to thank people, to show appreciation, and to never expect them to simply just do things [4].

Nawaz [41] concedes that many employees are afflicted by stress and anxiety that make brushing teeth and cooking a meal feel like the day’s crowning achievements. In such circumstances, employees feel overworked, underappreciated, and cut off from their colleagues and, as there is no panacea for these current ills, regularly practising gratitude can help.

Research clearly indicates that expressing gratitude is beneficial to our health and well-being. We are happier when we are grateful. During a crisis, taking the time to thank others is vital to dampen loneliness, amp up social connections, and generate generosity. Yet, while the benefits of gratitude are widely acknowledged, we feel thankful a lot more often than we express it – and it seems to be least often expressed at work. But as leaders, it is absolutely essential to express gratitude to the employees, especially now. For one thing, being thankful to the team is the right

thing to do. People are battling fears about the pandemic and juggling home and work in close proximity. Almost every employee needs to hear that their dedication is noticed and it matters. What's more, gratitude is proven to show improvements in self-esteem, achieving career goals, decision making, productivity, and resilience. When people around the leader feel seen and acknowledged, they return the favour, invest more in their efforts, and form stronger connections – all essential ingredients to offset the stress of a crisis. What is more, giving thanks can be infectious. Even when we are uncertain about the present and future, one thing that we control are our actions. We can choose to help sincere expressions of appreciation catch on. When leaders share their affect with their employees and compliment them for a job well done, the employees feel valued and appreciated. They feel that their work is valued and worth the efforts to act proactively. These feelings are likely to increase their motivation to reproduce them and may lead to self-directed actions and the initiation of changes at work [20]. Recent interview studies show that the language of leadership and management is the language of meaning and context. When leaders use a motivating language, they develop a sense of communal trust between workers and management.

As far as reacting to an employee's good performance is concerned, Bonchek and France [6] suggest the key concept – that motivation is less about employees *doing great work* and more about employees *feeling great about their work*. The better employees feel about their work, the more motivated they remain over time. But far more powerful is the leader's commitment to recognising and acknowledging contributions so that employees feel appreciated and valued, and they are motivated when they feel appreciated and recognised for their contributions.

When it comes to reacting to an employee's failure, Shapira [7] says, before starting to communicate to others, the leaders should take a minute to pause and breathe. Since when you are the most senior person in a room, your team takes its cues from you in terms of how to act and how to feel. Taking a minute to centre yourself will ensure that you present a calm, rational force to your colleagues and clients. Similarly, when you feel anxiety, you transmit that to others. Studies of empathetic stress have found that observing others experiencing stress could cause observers to feel more anxious themselves.

Although the interviews subject to our research were held in English and no translation was needed before analysing the polite responses, future research may be conducted to investigate how the politeness phrases are translated in the automatic translation systems. That quality translation is important is proven by Seljan [42] who stresses that, since 2007 Total Quality Management has become a standard in the Directorate General of Translation. Furthermore, in order to obtain useful information about benchmarking of translations, Schiaffino et al. [43] have developed a Translation Quality Index, whose aim is to assess the ratio between quality and cost, taking into account linguistic and technical background, detail-oriented editors and knowledgeable proof-readers, as well as terminology work, time aspect and customer feedback [21].

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **RESEARCH INSTRUMENT**

As far as our research methodology is concerned, first, convenience sampling was used to recruit ten (10) leaders of primary, secondary and private language schools in North Macedonia, that is, the authors had contacted (via phone or email) school leaders to whom they explained the goal of their research and its method, and asked them if they would like to participate. Once the leaders had agreed to be included in the research, the authors sent them a consent form, which was signed by all the leaders thus confirming to have been fully informed about the research: what it was to be about, how it was to be conducted, what their part was to be in it, that their contribution was

voluntary and completely anonymous, meaning that no disclosure of their identity would be ever made, and that they could withdraw from it at any time.

Second, DCTs were used as a data elicitation method, that is, the leaders were given open-ended, only topically specified scenarios of everyday COVID-19-related situations from their workplace context.

Being assigned a situation, the respondents reminiscent of a case that had really happened in their newest pandemic life (since 16 March 2020) and recreate their language reaction to it. Interviews were held individually – one at a time, with an interviewer and an interviewee, they were videoed, held via the Cisco Webex platform, recorded, and transcribed. Eventually, the leaders' language choices were analysed.

This article is an extension of a study that was conducted with a seven-item questionnaire: five (5) questions for gathering general information, and two (2) scenarios, where Vaneva and Bojadjiev [44] investigated the ways leaders had recently apologized to an employee and had recently thanked them.

For the purpose of this study, the extended interview consists of eleven (11) items: the first five gather information about the gender, age, education level, sector, and length of the interviewees' leadership position before proceeding to the next, six situations that formed the core of the interview: how they have presented a problem to their employees, how they have reacted to a problem presented by their employee, how they have recently apologised to an employee, recently thanked, how they have reacted to their employee's good performance and to their employee's failure (the interview structure is given in the Appendix.)

The authors have chosen to ask the leaders situations that are common to their everyday business context, so that they would easily identify themselves with the given scenarios. The interviewees were only asked to concentrate on the period after 16 March 2020 and to try to recreate their response or reaction to a particular situation as truthfully as possible, by giving the language they had actually used.

In order to test the interview, that is, to evaluate the appropriateness of the situations as well as to ensure their understandability by the respondents, before starting the actual research, the interviewing had been piloted with a language school in Singapore. The school's leader gave his answers to the situations – DCTs – part of our research interview. As the piloting was done successfully and proved that no revision to the situations was needed, we proceeded to conduct the actual interviews.

## **DATA AND STATISTICAL METHODS**

The study was conducted in ten (10) different schools: primary and secondary schools from the public sector, and language schools from the private sector. The public schools' directors and the private schools' owners were interviewed online and their participation was recorded. The interview situations had not been shared with the respondents before the interview, thus ensuring their most authentic answers in both content and form.

The information gathered for this study has been linguistically analysed, that is, the interviews have been listened to, transcribed, words and phrases counted, and the language analysed.

## **RESULTS**

Of the ten leaders interviewed for the purpose of this study, five (5) were heads of private language schools, three (3) were leaders of public primary schools, one (1) was a leader of a public high school, and one (1) was at the head of a private high school.

As far as the gender is concerned, eight (8) were female (80 %) and only two (2) – (20 %) were male.

Concerning the age, three (3) leaders were in the age range 30 to 40, another three (3) were in the group between 40 to 50 years old, and four (4) school leaders were 50 to 60 years old.

Regarding education, six (6) leaders had a bachelor degree, and the other four (4) held master degrees.

Certainly, the sector they came from was education, as only that sector was investigated, while the length of their leadership position varied. Only one (1) interviewee was leading less than a year, one (1) was leading for three years, one (1) – six years, one (1) – eight years, two (2) – ten years, one (1) – fourteen years, one (1) – fifteen years, and one (1) – twenty-five years.

**Table 1.** Interviewees' demographic data.

<b>Gender</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
Male	2	20
Female	8	80
<b>Age</b>		
30-40	3	30
40-50	3	30
50-60	4	40
<b>Education</b>		
Bachelors	6	60
Masters	4	40
<b>Sector</b>		
Education	10	100
<b>Length of leadership position</b>		
Less than 1 year	1	10
3 years	1	10
6 years	1	10
8 years	1	10
10 years	2	20
14 years	1	10
15 years	1	10
25 years	1	10

In continuation, we analyse four of the situations that we have selected to be subject to our study.

### **APOLOGISING TO AN EMPLOYEE**

When apologising, 'sorry' is definitely the most common form, as our corpus shows that later, but other words that can be used to apologise are: 'afraid', 'apologise', 'apology', 'excuse', 'forgive', 'pardon' and 'regret'.

Table 2 shows the patterns used by our respondents when the situation required an apology on their part.

One leader has claimed that, due to the wonderful collaboration she has with her employees, she has never needed to apologise, so no answer has been recreated in this scenario.

While the rest, when given the situation, two leaders recreated their reaction without hinting to any form of apology, with one of them talking about the problem – rescheduling classes but without actually apologising to the students for cancelling their class that week.

**Table 2.** Apologising patterns used by the interviewees.

Phrases/Words	No
<i>I apologise</i>	3
<i>I am sorry</i>	4
No formal pattern	2
No answer	1

The actual words being used are:

***I have an urgent thing to do today at 9:30 so the classes are cancelled; we are going to have the classes on Friday this week because this group does not have classes on Friday.***

As a matter of fact, this is not apologising at all, since the speaker focuses her expression on the task – rescheduling the class (what would have required an apology) – instead of feeling responsible for doing something wrong and feeling sorry.

The second of these two ‘non-apologising’ leaders has used ‘please’, which has been her way of excusing her behaviour and ‘softening’ the assumed wrongdoing. This interviewee’s right words are:

***Please don’t take me for granted this period because I am really out of my mind and I have a lot of problems so please just try to understand me.***

Again, no explicit, straightforward, formal apology is given, but semantically regret for not doing something right is felt and the speaker is admitting to not having behaved well.

The typically apologising pattern used by three leaders will be portrayed with this answer:

***I apologise for not informing you that today’s classes were cancelled.***

And the ‘sorry’ answer has been given by four leaders. One of these four, after being told the news of the employee about not feeling well and possibly having contracted the virus, has said:

***I am sorry to hear that, we will find a substitution; just keep me informed about your test result and your general health.***

So, out of the ten (10) interviewed leaders, seven (7) have given an apology in situations that require such a reaction, which makes us conclude that our school leaders use an emphatic language.

## THANKING AN EMPLOYEE

Besides apologising, thanking is another language strategy that shows care for the interlocutor. The following table shows how thanking has been used by our respondents.

**Table 3.** Thanking patterns used by the interviewees.

Phrases/Words	No
<i>Thank you (so, very much)</i>	8
No pattern	2

Eight (8) leaders have formally (and semantically) thanked their employees, while two (2) have done it covertly – their expression does not contain a thanking word, but they are equally encouraging and appreciative of their employees, if not even more than those who have been openly thankful.

The following example illustrates an extended gratification given by one leader:

***Thank you, thank you so much, because despite your current situation/illness you did your best, were able to hold your online lessons from home, and I am deeply grateful for it.***

In this expression, ‘thank you’ is strengthened by ‘so much’, and, as if not enough, it is all emphasised with ‘grateful’. The impression is that the speaker wants to repeat her gratefulness.

Another leader who did not use a formal means to thank but semantically expressed his satisfaction with his employee's proposal said:

*Wow, that is a great idea, I think we should try this, we should see how it goes. I believe it could work. If you need my support, I will be online, you can call or message me and I can help. I believe it is a great idea you have.*

There is no mention of 'thank you' or words and phrases similar to it, but the leader chooses to show satisfaction with his teachers' behaviour by praising his work using the words 'great', 'we should ...', 'I believe', and basically making himself available to the employees – to contact him whenever they need.

Another leader and school owner has recreated her very characteristic way of thanking her teachers, saying that whenever she is satisfied with their behaviour and results, she thanks them by using the following sentence:

*The students come to my school because of you, because of the teachers.*

This is a very powerful sentence, which praises the teachers' work better than any other thanking pattern and openly motivates the employees to continue working in the way they do.

All in all, the thanking strategy entirely shows the leaders' inclination to the use of motivating language.

## REACTING TO AN EMPLOYEE'S GOOD PERFORMANCE

Employees are attuned to whether leaders have a genuine connection to the work. If learners are not engaged and enthusiastic about the company, the team, or the work, it is unlikely that that leader will be a great motivator of others. Simply put, if the leaders are motivated, their learners are, too, and the first step to installing motivation is by thanking.

The following table shows what language the school leaders have used when reacting to their employee's good performance.

**Table 4.** Reaction patterns used by the interviewees.

Types of words	No
Positive words	9
Positive structure	1

Since this situation asked the leaders to recreate what they normally say when their employee has performed well, they have all chosen to use positive words.

Considering that all the ten leaders gave differently structured answers (rather difficult to be grouped) yet all of them positively painted, we cite them all here:

*That was marvellous, and I would like you to post the parent's reaction publicly so that everybody can see it.*

*Thank you very much, I appreciate this very much.*

*That was a great job you did last week with your group of students and it was great that you prepared the students for the math competition so I hope you and your students will have great results.*

*Excellent job, dear colleague! I wish you continue you work and do it even better in the future.*

*Wonderful, bravo, well done for all your successes, keep up the great work, I am so proud of you and the school is so proud of you.*

*I really appreciate what you have done. This project plan is great, I am going to give my best so that we could implement it.*

*It is a great success for the team, for all of us that now one of our teachers is training the German teachers in the US and in Mexico. I would like to thank those who really tried new stuff and brought new ideas. With these institutes requesting to see our online classes I believe we must have done something right here.*

*Bravo, I am so happy for you, bravo, you did it well, please keep giving this great encouragement to your students.*

*That was very good of you, you should keep doing it that way.*

Nine (9) leaders have used positive words, mostly adjectives, to praise their teachers for their good performance, to show appreciation for their work and to encourage them to continue to work with the same level of dedication. The previously listed words show that all of them are positive, both formally and semantically. Those are the underlined words in our examples: *marvellous, great, excellent, wonderful, proud, appreciate, well, very good, bravo*, etc. They show the leaders' satisfaction and spread positivity onto their hearers.

One (1) leader did not use a word that can be labelled as typically positive, but rather used a structure that altogether conveys a positive spirit. The sentence is:

*Thank you, without your participation in the work we would not have been able to apply for this project, and now I hope we will get it.*

This tells the teacher that their participation in the project has been invaluable, and it motivates them to work even harder.

All these answers show that our leaders tell employees that their contribution is noticed and that their progress is constantly monitored.

## REACTING TO AN EMPLOYEE'S FAILURE

Failures happen and they are a natural, expected part of everyday business life. But as much as employees should learn how to deal with them, even better – to minimize their occurrences – undoubtedly, leaders should handle their followers' failures in the most dignified way. The following table shows our results classified in six patterns, starting from the strictest to the most lenient reaction to the situation.

**Table 5.** Reaction patterns used by the interviewees.

Functions of phrases/words	No
Reprimanding	2
Direct asking	2
Comforting	2
Reassuring	2
Offering to help	1
Asking politely	1

When the leaders were faced with situations that asked them to recreate their answer to their employee's failure, our interviewees gave an array of choices. That is, we classified the reactions that they gave in five patterns – we grouped two answers per pattern.

When finding out about their teachers' failure, the leaders who chose to reprimand them, said the following:

*You should inform me on time for your problem, so you should do it next time.*



***You should have informed me that you are not coming to classes today so I can reschedule the classes and, now because you did not inform me, the students came to school and you were not here so it was a problem situation because I had not thought of another teacher who would come and take the class. Next time please inform me.***

Although written (since the intonation from the spoken form would have been more indicative of the true nature of this reaction), the modal verb 'should' brings us into the reprimanding space created with this pattern. 'Should do something' is used for actions that are suggested for the future, while 'should have done something' is a structure used for past actions when the speaker reprimands the hearer for an action that was right to be done in the past but had not been performed, so with it the leader reprimands the employee and asks him to do it next time. These two situations illustrate a rather clear reprimand, when despite the function of advising, 'should' reprimands too, thus, the hearer knows how to behave in the future.

Similar in tone to reprimand is the form of directly asking the hearer to do something. The following examples illustrate this:

***Dear colleague, I will ask you not to be late for classes, because they are already short enough. OK, you failed this time but next time try to finish by the deadline.***

These two leaders recognise that their employees have failed in these particular situations but ask them to be more careful next time and do their job more conscientiously.

More welcoming language on the leaders' part is used in the following situations; we will first look at comforting:

***Do not worry about it, it can happen, the most important thing is that you have participated in the competition so next time you participate, I am sure all effort you have made will be valued and you will succeed.***

***Do not discourage yourself, please be strong and understand the parents and their needs and please next time think twice before you do something.***

These two leaders have chosen to be more lenient to their employees and to soothe them, not mentioning the failure but encouraging them to go on, to compose themselves and continue their work not bothering themselves with the actual results.

Not only is the whole message positive, but there are positive words too, like: 'please', 'strong', as well as the phrases 'don't worry', 'do not discourage yourself', etc.

Regarding reassuring, as it might be expected, this pattern has an unbelievably positive effect on the hearers since, amid the whole uncertainty, fear and frustration, the employees want to hear that the situation will end soon (the first example in continuation), or that it will be better next time (the second example). This assures them that, although their failure is noticed, it is not counted as their disadvantage, and that everybody tries and, as a result, either succeeds or fails. Thus, not being successful is part of the working process but, when this difficult situation improves, it will be easier for everyone, as the following examples show:

***We have to confirm – the end of this situation is very close, hopefully, in September we will be back to school, so keep up the way you did it previously.***

***Don't worry, don't be angry, calm down, next class will be OK.***

'Hopefully' and 'OK' are the positive words that blanket the whole expression and reassure the teachers that their effort is not wasted – it will yield better results next time.

When somebody fails to do something, the most professional and humane approach is to offer to help, and one of our leaders has chosen this technique:

*As far as I am concerned, I have to inform you that we have a lot of written complaints from some students and their parents about the way you organise your classes so I think that in order to perform better we could offer you some technical assistance with some of our teachers that are more experienced with technology so that you could perform better.*

This is the most indirect and polite way of saying that something is not done well, that the person needs to improve, thus showing care for the employee's feelings, but by offering help, the leader also shows concern for this teacher's professional growth and development. There is no insult here as, judging by the wording, the message is conveyed in the most subtle and tactful way. The whole expression is outright indirect, while the modal 'could' just adds to its politeness level.

This last example, in continuation, politely asks the teacher to do what is anyway expected from him, but the way it is structured makes no room for misinterpretation or offence on the part of the hearer:

*Do you remember that we said we would need you to participate in the online survey until this day? I would appreciate it if you could be on time because otherwise, I would have to get back to you and that creates additional work for me so I would appreciate it if we could do our tasks on time and if we don't do, then to contact each other with concrete date and date the task can be done.*

Again, a modal is used, plus the word 'appreciate' intensifies the polite, kind and well-mannered address by the leader, when the speaker is polite enough to maintain the good relationship with the employee but strict enough to ask the hearer to do his job, on time.

## **DISCUSSION**

Our research had no intention to focus on the difference between the language used by male and female leaders, but since the majority of our interviewees (80 %) were female and we have read some findings in terms of the language used in the particular situations, it might be worth considering the gender difference in these pandemic circumstances, as studied in literature.

In our study, the male leaders' language (of those 20 %) was in no way different from the female leaders' expression (those 80 %), but we cannot guarantee that this result would have been the same if the male and female leaders had been equally represented in our research. Since the kind, polite, thoughtful and considerate approach have been labelled as characteristics of women, regardless of the position they have, and literature has particularly analysed them in these pandemic times, we would like to refer to examples of some powerful female leaders and their acts in these circumstances.

The broader explanation behind this lies in the several common characteristics in how the heads of Germany, Taiwan, New Zealand, Iceland, Finland, Norway, Denmark and Serbia dealt with the pandemic: they listened to scientific expertise; implemented widespread testing; gave easy access to quality medical treatment; relied on aggressive contact tracing; and imposed tough restrictions on social gatherings. When discussing effective pandemic leadership, it is proposed that those leaders who gave everyone a voice, through the power of their own voice, who listened carefully and who directed attention to relational understandings of the situation were the ones with the most successful outcomes. And, we also know that the leaders embodying these characteristics are overwhelmingly women – for whichever sociological, political or psychological, complicated reasons. The reasoning of an ethic of care is, inductive, contextual and psychological, rather than deductive or mathematical – and this is what is needed during unprecedented crises.

Our analysis shows that out of the two research propositions that grounded the research, the interview findings resulted in accepting both of the propositions that we have set as the basis for our research.

The answer to the first research proposition (RP<sub>1</sub>), which states that during the COVID-19 pandemic, leaders have been mindful about their use of language, was accepted. The results have shown that leaders have been cautious in choosing the language when communicating with their employees in these pandemic circumstances. As this first research proposition is very much connected with the second one, the proof that the first research proposition is accepted is contained and seen in the next proposition.

That is, the second research proposition (RP<sub>2</sub>), suggesting that in the pandemic circumstances, when interacting with their employees, leaders use more positive, encouraging than negative, reprimanding language was accepted. In other words, when interacting with their employees, leaders use more positive, more encouraging than negative, reprimanding language, seen in the following conclusions: out of ten (10) leaders – when apologising, seven (7) have chosen to give an open apology; when thanking, eight (8) interviewees have used positive words to express their gratification; when reacting to their employees' good performance, even nine (9) respondents used different positive, encouraging words; while when reacting to their followers' failure, six (6) leaders used indirect and empathic language of reassuring, comforting, offering to help and asking politely as opposed to four (4) who were reprimanding and asking directly. This shows that the leaders' use of positive language definitely prevails the neutral or less encouraging (but not explicitly negative) language. The results that support the acceptance of the second research proposition also go in favour of accepting the first research proposition since the leaders' use of more positive and encouraging language in the pandemic proves that they have been truly mindful about the language they have chosen to use.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study's results support the two hypotheses set as a ground for our research. Namely, the results show that during the COVID-19 pandemic school leaders have indeed been mindful about their use of language, since they have properly reacted to the situations that needed recreation of their responses. In other words, they apologised when apologising was in question, thanked when thanking was needed, adequately reacted to their employees' good performance, and cautiously used their expressions when reacting to the teachers' failure.

The study answered the research questions that we envisaged to be investigated, but putting it in a broader context and looking at its implications more prospectively, several limitations can be highlighted.

Considering that this study is part of a larger project in which more leaders but from different sectors were interviewed and we here chose to present the situation only in the education sector, the first limitation is the fact that only ten leaders' interviews were analysed. That is, future research can include more leaders of education institutions. Another limitation can be the gender imbalance among the interviewees, with 8 females and 2 males. When expanded, this study may include an equal number of male and female leaders so that conclusions can be drawn regarding the leaders' gender language. A further limitation can be the non-inclusion of higher education institutions, so in the future, university leaders in North Macedonia can be interviewed for the purposes of this research. Finally, it can have comparative aspects if compared with the situation in another country, in order to illustrate how in this pandemic leaders' language is used elsewhere.

Compared to previous studies [12, 13, 15, 19], this research confirms that communication and language are very important in leadership context, since by using motivating and empathetic

language, leaders motivate and inspire their followers, give them psychological support, connect with them socially, instil trustworthiness, and help them identify with the organisation they work in. Leaders' positive words make the employees more positive and secure at work, and feel they belong to the workplace [5], as well as when employees see more relatedness in their leaders' language choices, they will be more motivated and energised in their work [20]. The definition of transformational leadership, when an individual (that is, the leader) engages with others and creates a connection that raises the level of motivation and morality at both levels [16] shows that in school context, what our study researches, transformational leadership positively influenced school performance, when measured by student achievement and quality of teacher instruction [35]. All this leads us to the conclusion that if authentic, motivating and empathetic language is used by the leader, not only to say the right words, but to mean them, the employees will be more connected to the top level, will feel safe, trust them and ultimately follow the leaders [4].

The practical implication of this study is to give the school leaders an insight into the role that language plays in the communication with their employees in a pandemic situation, thus help all leaders, not only of schools, to see the effects of positive language so that shape the way they communicate with their employees in the future. The results will also offer the leaders a chance to self-critically look at the language choices they make and reflect on their way of using it in their business context.

They can certainly learn from the answers given to all scenarios, which are all summed up in the fact that when apologising, thanking, reacting to an employee's good performance, and reacting to an employee's failure, the more positive words and phrases are used, the better. That is because employees need to feel closer to the leader, as one of them; in the case of apologising; to appreciate their hard work, in the case of thanking; to be praised, after performing well; and comforted, after failing in something.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The authors thank the school leaders who have voluntarily agreed to be interviewed for the purpose of our research and have unselfishly devoted time to share their reactions to some of the pandemic-related scenarios that have happened in their schools.

## **APPENDIX**

### **COVID-19 Post-Lockdown Leader – Employee Interaction**

Leaders' interview structure:

1. Male/female
2. Age
3. Education level
4. Sector
5. Length of their leadership position

***You will be asked to talk about situations that have happened after the emergence of the current coronavirus pandemic. Please use direct speech, first person singular form, and imagine the interviewer is your employee – address her.***

6. Think of a recent problem situation that you had to present to your employees and recreate it (give the actual words you used when presenting the problem).
7. Think of a problem situation your employee presented to you and recreate your response to it (give the actual words you used when reacting to your employee's problem).

8. Think of a situation in which you have recently apologised to an employee and recreate it by using your actual words.
9. Think of a situation in which you have recently thanked a colleague and recreate it by using your actual words.
10. Think of a situation when your employee performed well and recreate your reaction.
11. Think of a situation when your employee failed to do something and recreate your reaction.

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