Article

Feminine vs. Masculine: Expectations of Leadership Styles in Hotels during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: Tourism and hospitality were among the first sectors to be severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and are still recovering from the crisis. In the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, a package of precautionary measures taken to contain the virus brought tourist activities to a complete standstill and changed tourists' expectations and behavioral patterns. The COVID-19 pandemic presented the ultimate test for organizational leaders, who had had no chance to prepare (themselves) for the challenges that were to come. The leaders had to face uncertainty and make decisions that impacted the companies' future success, understood as their continued existence. This study provides an up-to-date and innovative contribution to the areas of leadership and staff turnover in the hospitality industry from the perspective of transformational leadership theory. This article explores the leadership adopted by hotel managers in Poland during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic from March to December 2020 and offers useful insights into employees' expectations towards leaders. A mixed methods approach was applied in the study, including focus groups and semi-structured interviews. The interviews were conducted in 35 hotels with 204 participants. The results point out that respondents preferred a feminine leadership style, at least in times of crisis, and thus statistically they most often cited "inclusivity, collaboration and empowerment", "empathy and care", and "transparency and communication" as desirable examples of leadership attributes. On the other hand, masculine attributes of crisis leadership, i.e., "resilience and courage" and "decisiveness and risk-taking" were indicated less frequently. An interesting result was a significant pool of responses indicating the search for various ways of adaptive leadership. This study provides a more nuanced, comprehensive assessment of the quality of staff attitudes in off-chain hotels in Poland, taking into account the impact of leadership style on staff turnover at the business unit level. The leadership lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic could possibly shed light on some key actionable attributes and skills that future leaders will need to develop to overcome (at least in the initial phases) any future crisis.

Keywords: crisis management; COVID-19; hospitality; leadership; leadership style

1. Introduction

At the time of writing this article, three years have passed since the COVID-19 pandemic broke out in Europe; as of 17 March 2020, every European country had confirmed a single case, and all had reported at least one death [1]. In reaction to the pandemic, governments developed strategies to counteract and limit the spread of the virus. At the beginning of the pandemic in Europe, that is, in March and April 2020, the authorities of most countries decided to seal their borders and brought mandatory quarantine regulations for foreign tourists [2]. In Poland, similarly to many countries worldwide, severe restrictions limiting the freedom of movement were put into effect (and enforced). It was forbidden to organize mass events, concerts, and weddings. As a result, the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown decisions significantly affected the global economy, and the pandemic is perceived as

one of the biggest contemporary crises that brought un-precedented challenges for people, society, and business.

Tourism and hospitality were among the first sectors to be greatly impacted by the pandemic because a series of security measures employed to bring the virus under control led to an abrupt and complete halt in tourist activities. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the global tourism economy lost USD 1.3 trillion in revenue in 2020, and 100–120 million jobs in tourism were put at risk [3]. Three years later, tourism still has not reached the levels of pre-pandemic times. However, according to UNWTO, international tourism recovered to 63% of pre-pandemic levels in 2022, with Europe and the Middle East at the forefront. Based on UNWTO's scenarios, international tourist arrivals could reach 80% to 95% of pre-pandemic levels in 2023 [4].

The COVID-19 pandemic was more complex than the crises and disasters examined in the hospitality literature, which typically focuses on a single type of crisis, such as a financial crisis, natural disaster, or terrorist attack within a single country or region or a single industry [5]. For hospitality firms, precarious economic conditions and fear of the virus have seriously impinged upon travel and tourism expenditures among business-to-consumer and business-to-business clients [6]. The constraints impose a huge impact on the hospitality industry and posed a threat of shutting down many of them. During the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic in Poland, the use of hotels was restricted several times. In the first wave of the pandemic in 2020, the government introduced a nationwide lockdown from March 13th to April 11th, when all non-core businesses, including hotels, were closed [7]. Later in the year, as the situation was exacerbated, the government imposed another country-wide lockdown from 28 December 2020 to 17 January 2021, during which period the use of hotels was restricted again [8].

The COVID-19 pandemic presented the ultimate test for organizational leaders [9]. During the time of the COVID-19 outbreak, in the midst of uncertainty, leaders made every effort to tackle many new challenges while bearing responsibility for employees. The pandemic crisis kept generating new uncertainties. Hotel managers as well as any other leaders had to keep abreast of rapidly changing local, regional, and national health guidelines and regulations. Compliance with these regulations was critical to avoid penalties, maintain the safety of guests and employees, and protect the reputation of the hotel. Hotel managers had to implement contact tracing protocols and capacity limits while also ensuring compliance with data privacy laws [10].

The list of challenges faced by hotel managers included not only regulatory compliance, health and safety measures, and new guest relations standards, but also dramatic revenue loss and financial constraints, operational adaptations, and a new approach to workforce management. Unpredictability and uncertainty have resulted not only in a wave of redundancies but also in the voluntarily handing in of notices and quitting jobs in hospitality, followed by a search for jobs in a more stable industry, such as retail [11].

Personnel turnover is a common issue and a significant challenge for employers in hospitality [12], but the scale of this phenomenon during the pandemic was particularly large. Some research findings indicate that efficient personal management can reduce turnover intentions [13]. However, during the pandemic crisis, many hotels experienced not only workforce reductions, but the real challenge was ensuring employees' safety and motivation while adapting to changing operational needs. Last but not least, staff retention was a condition for future planning and post-pandemic recovery [14]. Moreover, the service sector, including the hotel industry, builds its competitive advantage/edge on the quality of its human capital and employees' competencies.

Looking back, the decisions made by leaders under heightened uncertainty (during the first 2–6 months of the pandemic), when little was known about the virus and its impact, were a significant factor in the success or failure of organizations [15]. According to James and Wooten, leadership differentiates companies that thrive during and following a crisis from those that do not [16].

The time of the COVID-19 pandemic has reemphasized the importance of having the proper leadership during a crisis. This makes us examine the fundamental question: "What attributes make an effective leader during a (pandemic) crisis?".

Despite the rich achievements of the scientific literature on leadership styles (including leadership in times of crisis), there is a distinct lack of research on leadership in times of a pandemic crisis. The achievements made during the last pandemic, as well as within the two years after the end of the lockdown, are rather of a contributory nature, especially in relation to the tourism market. This is largely due to the fact that the shut-down of the travel sector during the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a significant turnover of staff, i.e., those people whose opinion on the assessment of leadership style should be treated as a priority. This study may at least partially fill this research gap given the fact that it covered off-chain hotels located outside large cities, often being some of the most important employers in the region and at the same time bereft of access to a broad labor market. As a result, hotel managers, anticipating the need for post-pandemic recovery, had to take special care of the staff's morale, as they were aware of the fact that it would not be easy to regain employees with appropriate competences after the crisis. Based on the theory of transformational leadership, we undertook to examine to what extent the leadership styles were desirable and conducive to the actual retention of staff.

2. Rationale for Research, Literature Review, and Hypotheses Development

2.1. Leadership and Leadership Styles

Initially, leadership was addressed mainly by sociology and political science, and it was associated with power. Leadership can be explained as the process of exerting influence over people and inspiring, motivating, and directing their actions to achieve organizational or group goals. Leadership may stem from a formal managerial position or an informal, non-sanctioned role [17]. It can be based on position, authority, and seniority. Both formal and informal leadership structures are crucial, as leadership results from the interaction between leaders, followers, and the situation.

The concept and perception of leadership have evolved. Initially, leadership was thought to be associated with a specific set of qualities, but efforts to pinpoint a universal set of traits that could guarantee leadership success were unsuccessful [18]. After researchers rebutted the trait theory, they turned their attention to identifying behaviors that good leaders should exhibit—which gave rise to behavioral leadership [19]. On the other hand, contingency theories concentrate on understanding the contexts in which leaders' behaviors are operational and state that there is no superior leadership style, but the context and conditions should be considered [20].

Several leadership styles can be distinguished. The prevalent ones are the autocratic, paternalistic, laissez-faire, transactional, and transformational leadership styles. The primary differences between leadership styles reside in the way leaders communicate with others and make decisions for their teams.

Autocratic leaders are typically strict and closely monitor their subordinates. They reserve their decision-making rights for themselves and usually make decisions without consultation [21]. This type of leader relies on threats and punishment to put pressure on employees, which stems from the fact that the leader does not place trust in subordinates [22].

On the other hand, paternalistic leaders exercise dominant authority and perceive their subordinates as members of a large, extended family. They are seen as individuals who prioritize the best interests of their subordinates, and in return, they expect their subordinates to manifest trust, loyalty, and obedience [23].

The third style—democratic leadership—is distinguished by group members' active roles in the decision-making process. Subordinates are allowed to participate, come up with ideas, exchange views, and engage in discussions before the leader makes the final decision. What is more, the democratic leader ensures that their employees are updated on everything that affects their work [24].

Next, the leadership style known as laissez-faire involves leaders delegating tasks to subordinates with minimal guidance. As a result, the leader provides few or no directions, and employees are given significant freedom to determine goals, make decisions, and resolve problems independently [25].

Furthermore, the transactional leadership style is based on an exchange or transaction. It emphasizes reward and punishment to motivate employees. Moreover, subordinates need to be carefully monitored to ensure that expectations are met [26].

Lastly, the transformational leader encourages, inspires, and motivates employees. The concept of transformational leadership was coined by Downton and was expanded by Bass. According to Bass there are four main characteristics of transformational leaders: supporting the development of subordinates' skills; intellectual stimulation and fostering independent problem-solving approaches and strategies by employees; inspiration and using effective communication techniques; and being a charismatic leader who offers vision and a mission [27]. According to transformational leadership theory, a leader works with followers to identify the changes needed, create a common vision through inspiration, and execute change with a group of highly committed followers. Unlike previous leadership styles, where the leader seemed to possess all the power in a team, transformational leadership distributes power amongst all stakeholders. What is more, transformational leaders take care of employees by providing them with the support they need, which helps strengthen the bonds and reduce employees' intentions to quit the organization [28].

However, the leadership process is multifaceted, and efforts to identify a universal leadership style proved unsuccessful as the proposed models could not be fully validated in practice.

Tannenbaum and Schmidt [29] suggested that a leader must consider three pressures before deciding on the most appropriate style. These are the team members, the situation, the leader, and lastly the interrelationships between the above three factors. The crucial aspect of this model was that the leadership style would vary depending on the situation and would be subject to dynamic changes.

2.2. Feminine, Masculine, and Androgynous Leadership Styles

Blake-Beard, Shapiro, and Ingols point out that leadership and the ideal manager have long been associated with masculine attributes such as being decisive, forceful, risk-taking, and dominant [30]. In addition, ambition, independence, dominance, and rationality belong to masculine features since they relate positively to the more traditional, hierarchical component of leadership characterized by instrumental behaviors (i.e., being goal-oriented) and represented by the so-called "think manager–think male" stereotype [31]. Eagly and Johnson believe that only a slight difference exists between the feminine and masculine leadership styles [32]. Some studies have confirmed that there is no or little difference between masculine and feminine leaders [33,34].

Leaders who display feminine traits may be perceived as lacking leadership gravitas. Feminine attributes, such as being compassionate, sympathetic, or soft-spoken, may put a leader in a position to effectively build the trust and collaboration necessary for current complexities and working globally across cultures [35–37]. Prioritizing interpersonal relationships, expressing emotions, rewarding positive behavior, or paying attention to personal and socioemotional factors beyond technical knowledge fall under feminine traits.

Masculinity and femininity are often conceptualized as two extreme ends of a single continuum. However, Bem developed the concept of androgyny. It implies that the qualities describing femininity and masculinity are complementary, not opposite. The concept includes the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI). This is a list of 60 attributes that characterize a person as masculine, feminine, or androgynous [38].

The last one describes a person who scores high in both masculine and feminine traits. Among feminine items, there are listed such attributes as affectionate, compassionate, gentle, loyal, sensitive to the needs of others, thoughtful, and generous. Characteristics labelled as masculine include, among others, being aggressive, ambitious, analytical, assertive,

competitive, independent, and individualistic. Examples of neutral items encompass being adaptable, friendly, happy, helpful, dependable, tactful, and others [38].

2.3. Styles and the Effectiveness of Leadership in Crisis—Rationale for Research

This study provides an up-to-date and innovative contribution to the areas of leadership and staff turnover in the hospitality industry from the perspective of transformational leadership theory. The off-chain hospitality industry has traditionally struggled with a high turnover of staff due to the flat organizational structure of the hotel and the consequent constraints on employee professional development. However, out-of-town off-chain hotels, which are often considered the most attractive workplace in the region, could usually count on a higher level of staff loyalty. The pandemic has disturbed this balance, also challenging the established premise in the research on hospitality employee turnover in chain and off-chain hotels. In addition, most research has explored the staff turnover concept in quantitative terms. This study provides a more nuanced, comprehensive assessment of the quality of staff attitudes in off-chain hotels in Poland, considering the impact of leadership style on staff turnover at the business unit level.

Some research findings indicate that while in a crisis, leaders are expected to act quickly, decisively, and with an autocratic orientation [39,40]. Indeed, contingency theory and the situational leadership model explain the current propensity to rely on masculine task-focused behaviors [37]. Both frameworks suggest that autocratic leadership is effective when the task is urgent, of the highest priority, and of high (in the case of COVID-19, existential) value.

However contemporary scholars have posited that feminine attributes build the trust and collaboration necessary for current global complexities [35,36,41]. That is why Blake-Beard et al. [30] proposed that the COVID-19 crisis should be a critical time for leaders to take up the androgynous leadership style, drawing from the entire portfolio of behaviors available to them, whether masculine or feminine. According to their research, two country leaders who had practiced androgynous leadership succeeded and saw a significant decrease in new COVID-19 cases and deaths, according to European center for disease prevention and control statistics. Another two leaders who had limited themselves to masculine behaviors continued to see COVID-19 cases and deaths grow [30].

Leadership is a complex, socially constructed concept, which makes it interesting and challenging to study and assess, especially in times of crisis. The literature review shows that the existing approach to leadership styles in crisis is very diverse and depends, among others, on the industry it concerns and the nature of the crisis (financial, political, epidemic, ecological, social). Based on the literature review, the final list of attributes of crisis leadership was formulated and was used in the course of the conducted research as a guideline for the system of coding the respondents' collected statements.

As a result, the effectiveness of leadership in overcoming the crisis can be defined in various ways. For example, it may mean ensuring the organization's financial stability, employees' safety, or maintaining the existing market relations. These effects are not always convergent.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the situation of hotels in Poland was extremely difficult as travelling and staying overnight at hotels was accessible only for business travelers, who usually chose hotel chains in larger cities. Moreover, the presented research was conducted only among the staff of small- and medium-sized off-chain hotels in Poland. In such hotels, the identity of the managerial and ownership structures is usually maintained (the facility's owner usually becomes the hotel director). However, managerial or ownership perceptions of the leadership effectiveness are not always consistent with the employees' point of view. For example, an indicator of success is usually financial security (which can be achieved, for example, by reducing the number of employees, especially when managers strive to reduce variable costs). From the employee's perspective, the continuity of the hotel's operation is essential as long as it means the certainty of maintaining the workplace.

It might seem that the low (usually zero) hotel occupancy rate during the pandemic was an amply justified reason for staff reduction. However, the relationships in the hotels surveyed often resembled family relationships, and the attitude towards employees went beyond the typical market exchange. In addition, the unpredictable policy of the Polish government during the pandemic created a high level of uncertainty. Hotel managers did not know when the economy would be reopened. It prompted many managers to keep staff on hold in the hope that operations could resume at any moment. Hotel leaders realized that a sudden start-up of the facility would make it difficult to recruit qualified staff. Therefore, layoffs were rare, and if they did occur, they were usually the result of decisions made by employees themselves, looking for a more secure place of employment (they usually chose retail food services, which were not subject to restrictions during the pandemic in Poland).

For this study, a personnel perspective was adopted, according to which the effectiveness of crisis leadership is expressed in the ability to retain or quickly regain personnel. The measure of leadership effectiveness is the staff turnover rate, i.e., the ratio of the sum of all employees made redundant or leaving the company on their own during the year to the sum of all employees currently employed in the company. The combination of qualitative and quantitative research allowed us not only to determine the staff's leadership style preferences but also the behavioral component of the attitude. This meant the need to link the declarations of the preferred leadership style with the actual attitude (the decision to leave or stay in the workplace).

Ipso facto, the axis of this article includes two research hypotheses. The first concerns the impact of crisis leadership attributes on the sense of security of hotel staff expressed by the employment turnover rate. This leads to our first hypothesis:

H1. *The crisis leadership attributes are particularly important from the perspective of the employees' sense of security (employment turnover rate).*

The second research hypothesis concerns the distinction between masculine and feminine leadership styles. For this purpose, a list of leadership attributes was formulated, and then those traditionally associated with the feminine and masculine leadership style were selected to determine which of them are more closely correlated with a low staff turnover rate in the surveyed hotels.

H2. *Feminine crisis leadership attributes are more conducive to retaining employees than masculine attributes.*

The leadership style in a given hotel (masculine/feminine) was determined based on the respondents' statements regarding descriptions of specific situations and quoted managerial decisions taken during the pandemic lockdown. A detailed description of the research method is presented in the next chapter.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Introductory Remarks

This study used a mixed-methods approach to investigate hotel staff preferences of leadership style (feminine vs. masculine) during the pandemic crisis. According to the literature, the complexity of leadership can be more effectively analyzed based on a mixed approach drawn from various methodologies [42]. The complex matter of the pandemic crisis, in which economic factors are strongly intertwined with human emotions, requires a combination of objectivist and subjectivist or quantitative and qualitative styles, as suggested by, among others, Johnson and Turner [43], Waller et al. [44], Mumford [45], Stentz et al. [42], Bass [46–48], and Creswell and Clark [49]. According to Veal [50], such an approach is particularly valuable in tourism research.

Some research considers convergent design to be appropriate in terms of revealing and interpreting the application of a leadership style that has come to the fore in recent years (androgynous leadership) [21–23,32]. In the descriptive method, a sample group is

identified and described [51]. An in-depth interview encourages respondents to explain their answers and brings a greater wealth of information [50]. In addition, the combination of qualitative methods increases the credibility of the study [52–54]. However, employee declarations as to the preferred leadership style revealed in the course of qualitative research need to be compared with the results of quantitative research (level of staff retention or turnover) to demonstrate the consistency or discrepancy between the respondents' declarations and their actual attitude to the leadership style (behavioral component of attitude). The qualitative dimension of the research was implemented using interpretive phenomenological analysis, which aimed to gain an in-depth understanding by focusing on how participants understood, described, and felt the phenomenon of leadership [43,49,55].

3.2. Sample and Data Collection

The research sample consisted of 204 hotel employees from a diverse range of hotels in Poland. Data collection included focus groups and in-person interviews with a range of hotel staff:

- Before the collection of formal data, a pilot focus group with 15 participants was conducted to confirm the validity of the selection of crisis leadership criteria in the hotel industry.
- The main research (in-person semi-structured interviews) was focused on the characteristics and effectiveness of distributed leadership practices, as well as the factors that had exerted an impact on them.
- In the last part of the study, staff fluctuation in the surveyed hotels was analyzed to determine the impact of leadership style on employee retention.

Prior to the collection of formal data, a pilot focus group with 15 participants was conducted during workshops accompanying a large nationwide scientific conference held in Poland [56,57]. The interview used a semi-structured protocol (specific questions were asked, but no specific response formula was given) to allow for in-depth responses [58]. In addition, the pilot study made it possible to examine the questions' appropriateness for discussion.

The pilot study aimed to confirm the validity of the selection of the initial group of crisis leadership attributes developed on the basis of the literature review (crucial leadership skills and qualities in times of crisis). This step was particularly important from the perspective of the method of coding respondents' answers. The research adopted the principle of abductive coding, which combines the positive aspects of deductive and inductive coding. Inductive coding refers to the process of identifying themes, patterns, and categories in collected data without relying on pre-existing theories or predetermined categories. In such an approach, researchers allow new themes and categories to emerge from the data rather than applying pre-established theoretical frameworks. In inductive coding, researchers analyze the collected data, such as interviews, without assuming any categories or theories in advance. The advantage of this approach is that researchers strive to remain open to various meanings, patterns, and relationships that emerge from the data.

On the contrary, the deductive approach involves testing existing theories or hypotheses by collecting and analyzing data. It follows a logical process where researchers start with a general theory or set of categories and then collect data to either support or refute it. The benefit of this approach is that researchers build on existing science. The downside, however, is being impervious to signals coming from the respondents' statements.

In view of the above, an abductive approach was adopted in this study; the first list of codes was developed on the basis of the literature review and the most frequently indicated criteria defining the leadership style, but the researchers remained open-minded to suggestions from respondents during the pilot study. Originally, the list consisted of 12 items. Among the criteria most often mentioned in the literature, the following were, in particular, integrity, intelligence, charisma, vision, communication, authenticity, influence, courage, managing emotions, self-awareness, participatory decision-making, and the ability to effectively give meaning.

In the course of pilot studies, some codes/categories were merged as very similar, e.g., "empathy" and "care"; "decisiveness" and "risk-taking"; "transparency", "communication", "inclusivity", "employee empowerment", and "collaboration". Some questions concerning managerial decisions were also removed, as the respondent could not have known the reasons for a managerial decision (e.g., the intention to change the current way of operating the hotel).

Finally, for the purposes of this study, this list of codes was condensed into a set of criteria for effective crisis leadership, including the following elements:

- Empathy and care (EC);
- Transparency and communication (TC);
- Adaptability (AD);
- Resilience and courage (RC);
- Decisiveness and risk-taking (DR);
- Inclusivity, collaboration, and empowerment (ICE).

Examples of the applied coding procedure are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Examples of the coding procedure.

Examples of the Coding Procedure		
Statement	**Core Statement**	**Category**
The leader kept telling us to do our job and leave the worries to him.	a sense of support and security	empathy and care (EC)
To me, the most important thing was honest communication […]. I wanted to know where I stood, even if I had to find out we were finally closing the hotel.	being informed	transparency and communication (TC)

Based on the suggestions made by pilot participants, some modifications were also introduced to improve the research tool [59], e.g., some questions were rejected due to the employees' lack of competence to assess these leadership qualities or the problem with subjective assessment of what a given feature is (e.g., charisma). The main study used a non-random method of selecting respondents by applying the snowball method, where the first group of hotel facilities covered by the study (12 facilities) was selected based on the previous professional contacts of the researchers, and then respondents were asked to indicate further hotels that might be interested in taking part in the research. In this way, the final size of the study sample was determined at the level of 204 employees of 35 hotels located in almost all Polish voivodeships (see Figure 1). They included 2-star facilities (6 hotels), 3-star facilities (18 facilities), and 4-star facilities (11 hotels) employing from 15 to 47 staff members. The size of the hotels also varied greatly, from 23 to 150 rooms.

In total, 204 respondents participated in the survey (129 women and 75 men, which quite well reflects the gender structure of employees in Polish hospitality). In addition, there was a wide range in age and seniority among the participants: 22% aged 20–29, 34% aged 30–39, 26% aged 40–49, 17% aged 50–59, and less than 1% over 60 years of age. The average age of the participants was 38 years, and their average job tenure was five years. The largest number of the respondents (30%) had worked in hospitality for at least five years. Detailed information about respondents and hotels included in the research is presented in Table 2.
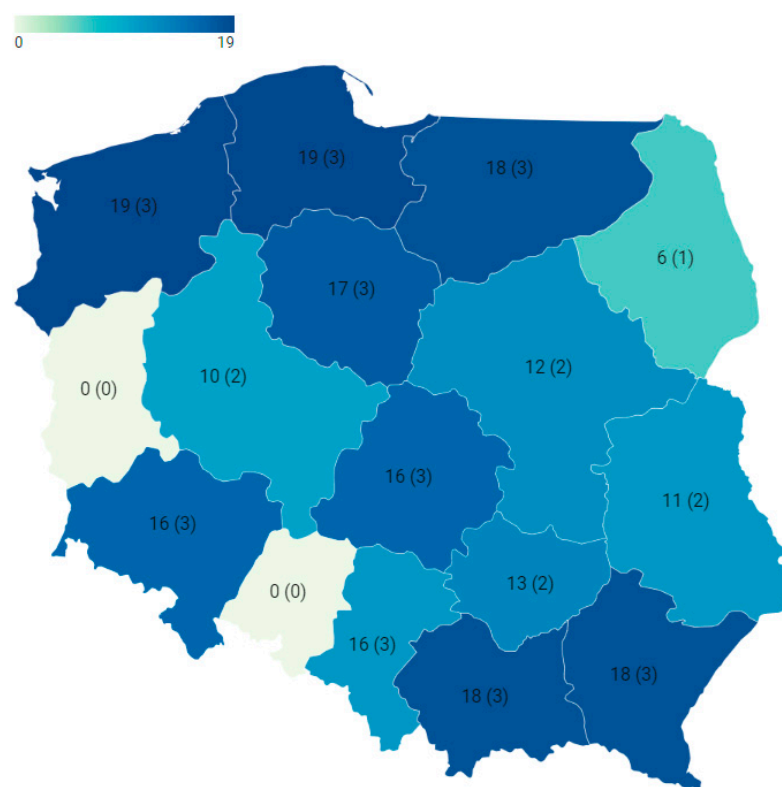
Figure 1. The number of employees interviewed, and the location and number of hotel facilities surveyed (in brackets).

Table 2. Classification of survey respondents and hotel details.

Characteristics of Hotel Employees		
Gender		
Female	129	63%
Male	75	37%
Age		
20–29	44	21.8%
30–39	69	33.4%
40–49	53	25.8%
50–59	35	17.6%
$\geq$60	3	1.4%
Position		
Front desk	59	28.9%
Event planning	28	13.7%
Hotel administration	30	14.7%
Housekeeping	45	22.1%
Hotel kitchen	25	12.3%
Food service	16	7.8%
Support staff	1	0.5%

Table 2. *Cont.*

Characteristics of Hotel Employees		
Years of working experience in hospitality		
≤1	29	14.2%
1–2	49	24.0%
2–5	39	19.1%
5–10	61	29.9%
≥10	26	12.7%
Hotel details		
Number of employees		
1–10	4	11.4%
11–20	17	48.6%
21–50	14	40.0%
Number of rooms		
1–10	2	5.7%
11–20	11	31.4%
21–50	10	28.6%
51–100	8	22.9%
101–150	4	11.4%
Category		
**	6	17.1%
***	18	51.4%
****	11	31.4%

During the main research, a focused group interview was first conducted in each hotel, i.e., an informal discussion during which several participants in the group interact with others on a specific topic, and which allowed for the initial exploration of moods and observations of study participants. Information was also collected on the scale of staff turnover in each hotel for the year preceding the pandemic (2019) and in 2020.

In the second stage, in-person interviews were conducted, making it possible to identify the characteristics and effectiveness of distributed leadership practices and the factors that influence their impact.

An interview guide, which is partly shown in Table 3, was structured as follows. First, we had a brief introductory interview to establish a relationship with an interviewee and to ensure that we had a common understanding of leadership [60]. Each respondent was asked to provide examples of leadership behaviors and managerial decisions that they personally remembered as particularly important (positive or negative) during the pandemic and the hotel closure period. In addition, participants were asked to provide examples of leadership behaviors of their managers that had a particular impact on the feelings of the team of employees as a whole. Then, the respondents were presented with a list of leadership attributes/traits (determined on the basis of a literature review) and were asked to provide examples of behaviors, which in their opinion reflect an assigned attribute in the behavior of hotel managers. Respondents were then asked to match the behaviors and decisions listed in the first part of the interview with specific leadership characteristics. In the last part of the interview, respondents were asked to identify three prominent highlights of their leaders that had the strongest influence on their decision whether to keep their current job or change it. At this stage, the aggregation method was

used [53,54] to identify specific thematic categories based on the detailed responses of the respondents.

Table 3. Excerpt from the interview guideline.

1. Do you consider your manager a leader?
2. What qualities make your manager a leader?
3. What does s/he lack to be considered a leader?
4. What behaviors or decisions of your manager do you remember as particularly important (positive or negative) during the pandemic and the hotel closure period? Why did you remember them as important?
5. Give examples of your manager's leadership behaviors that had a particularly strong impact on the feelings of the team as a whole? What comments did your colleagues make at that time?
6. Does the list of leadership qualities that I am about to show you now reflect your manager's attitudes in any way?
7. Try to match the behaviors and decisions you have listed in points 4 and 5 with the leadership qualities you see on the list.
8. Name the three leading features of your manager that had the greatest impact on your decision to stay in/change your job during the pandemic?

In-depth interviews were conducted in each facility until the level of saturation was reached (i.e., interviewees offered repetitive ideas, and no new information emerged) [54]. In addition, interviews were conducted personally by one researcher from March 2022 to January 2023 and served to determine the perception of leadership styles during the pandemic, but also to compare employees' opinions with the actual effectiveness of leaders, expressed as the ability to maintain low staff turnover.

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed using the Open AI Whisper tool. The transcripts were the basis of the analysis [43,44]. In-depth interviews lasted for 83 min on average.

4. Results

4.1. The Perception of Crisis Leadership Styles

The interviews offered useful insights into the perception of crisis leadership attributes and a database of 173 micro-cases that illustrate the specific ways in which hotel leaders acted during a pandemic crisis (the number of micro-cases is not equal to the number of respondents, as some of them recalled similar situations depicting leadership styles). As a result of coding respondents' statements, 28 recurring observations on how leaders respond to crisis situations were identified. Among the collected situations, one can clearly distinguish those corresponding to the criteria of effective crisis leadership, identified at the beginning of the study. Therefore, they were grouped and assigned to the appropriate categories (Table 4).

Table 4. Classification of employees' statements.

Main Categories of Staff Statements	Leadership Category
I felt that our hotel was ours, and the team was more than just co-workers.	EC, ICE
I felt safe, and I had a sense of support.	EC
Our needs were quickly discussed and addressed, even if concerned non-professional matters.	EC, DR
Private, family, and health problems were treated with attention and care.	EC
The effects of the lockdown in the private sphere were treated as seriously as the issues of hotel operation.	EC

Table 4. *Cont.*

Main Categories of Staff Statements	Leadership Category
Constant contact with employees was maintained (online or on-site).	EC
We were posted on the situation.	TC
The staff responded well to honest information, even if it was unfavorable.	TC
Factual communication of tasks was very important to us.	TC
We understood what we had to do.	TC, DR, A
The leader did not formulate unrealistic expectations but constantly ensured that each of us was kept busy.	DR, A
We were looking for new opportunities and opportunities to act and earn money—it was interesting and inspiring.	A, ICE
Even with zero occupancy, we knew what to do—it relieved frustration.	DR, ICE, A
We liked the unconventional approach to the business model.	A
I felt the leader knew what to do.	DR
We received frequent messages saying that we would deal with the crisis together.	DR, RC, A
The leader worked harder than usual but tried to keep calm in relations with its employees.	DR, RC
The leader openly informed us about negative government decisions and subsequent restrictions.	RC
The leader was able to talk about his/her mistakes and failures without hesitation—(s)he apologized to us and asked for advice; it motivated us a lot.	RC, ICE
The leader took responsibility for the economic situation of our hotel, even if it was in no way dependent on his/her/its decisions.	RC
I liked that (s)he made decisions without hesitation.	DR, RC
Quick decisions were important to me—every delay made me afraid.	DR, RC
Decisive actions made me act more willingly and think less about the general situation.	DR
Any new development, regulation change, etc., were immediately discussed with the team.	ICE
We were free to express our concerns about the activities undertaken at the hotel.	ICE, TC
The staff was encouraged to cooperate also in the area of personal problems.	ICE, EC
The leader identified our "secret powers"—it was interesting that such great people work in our team!	ICE, A
The leader willingly listened to our comments and ideas.	ICE
The contribution of each of us to solving problems was appreciated	ICE

The collected statements showing specific perceptions of the employers were assigned to individual criteria (in some cases more than one) indicating the number of hotels where given cases were reported by more than one person (Table 5). Moreover, researchers arbitrarily attributed specific criteria to the feminine (F) or masculine (M) leadership style, and in one case (Adaptiveness), the criterion was considered neutral (N). In particular, the group of feminine leadership attributes includes teamwork processes traditionally associated with femininity, such as prioritizing interpersonal relationships, expressing emotions,

and paying attention to personal and socio-emotional factors that surpass economic and financial aspects.

Table 5. Hotel employees' perception statistics.

	Reported Situations		Hotels		F/M/N
	No.	**%**	**No.**	**%**	
Inclusivity, collaboration, and empowerment (ICE)	189	93%	27	77%	F
Empathy and care (EC)	104	51%	23	66%	F
Transparency and communication (TC)	76	37%	18	51%	F
Resilience and courage (RC)	59	29%	9	26%	M
Adaptiveness (AD)	54	26%	11	31%	N
Decisiveness and risk-taking (DR)	47	23%	12	34%	M

The most relevant leadership attribute identified in the interviews (93% of interviews, 77% of hotels) was "inclusivity, collaboration, and empowerment" (ICE). Employees appreciated the attention with which managers referred to their ideas and contributions to solving problems and overcoming the crisis. In addition, what was vital for them was cooperation, a sense of community, joint responsibility, and a wholesome system of relations in the group of employees.

A high level of ICE was strongly correlated with the second most important criterion of crisis leadership, i.e., empathy and care (EC). The importance of this criterion was emphasized by as many as 51% of respondents in 66% of hotels. The pandemic period, associated with a threat to life and fear for loved ones, required special care for people and their families. Submitting financial reports and discussing economic performance in such situation would be perceived as annoying and callous. On the other hand, the attention paid to the well-being of people and specific actions aimed to give tangible aid to employees and their families aroused a sense of security and, at the same time, gratitude and loyalty.

The respondents' statements below illustrate their feelings regarding the selected behaviors of leaders. The quotes contain statements that do not refer directly to the leader's attitude but are strongly and emotionally charged. These fragments of the statements justify the special importance that the leadership attitude carried from the employee's point of view.

Failure to include staff in the discussion resulted in a sense of disdain and anxiety:

"We felt annoyed when we didn't know what was going on, and the leader didn't want to say anything. We didn't know if we would have enough money for a long time, whether we had enough money to cover the costs of our salaries or even electricity bills. The leader treated us paternalistically, like children with nothing to worry about. And we were terribly worried". (Respondent 134)

"The leader kept telling us to do our job and leave the worries to him. At first, it seemed ok, but after a few days we were nervous. Nobody knew anything; the leader was lost too, but he still pretended to know what to do. And after three weeks, he suddenly announced that we would be made redundant". (Respondent 12)

The interviewees emphasized that leaders (had) devoted a lot of attention to the personal situation of the employees. They showed interest in several problems that employees faced, such as

- Problems with daily shopping—a large part of the surveyed hotels are located in small towns, where problems with provisioning were much more significant than in larger cities (a problem reported by 114 respondents);

- The problem of access to electronic devices that could enable remote learning, especially in families with two or more children and only one computer at the disposal of the whole family (153 respondents);
- The problem of a place to work remotely in large families, where not every family member has their own room (78 respondents);
- The problem with the care of children who at that time were homeschooled and thus remained unattended (to) if both parents worked (167 respondents);
- The inability to provide adequate substantive support to children who found remote learning difficult (183 respondents);
- Fear for the health of loved ones and the need to care for the sick (86 respondents);
- Hindered access to doctors in the first period of the pandemic (74 respondents);
- Lack of hygiene products and masks in the first period of the pandemic (122 respondents).

Considering the gender and age structure of the respondents, it is not surprising that there was a significant number of problems related to family and upbringing of children. This resulted from the prevalent share of women in the hospitality employment structure. Therefore, the empathy shown by the leaders could not and was not limited to the readiness to listen to the problems. Shared assistance was organized in 28 hotels coordinated by ad hoc "crisis groups" within which car owners were appointed to help people without access to public transport and exposed to difficulties in gaining access to supplies. Again, selected quotes will help illustrate the problems discussed and the ways that leaders used to solve them:

"I had no idea (of) how to deal with shopping—both stores in our town were closed, and we didn't have a car. The leader proposed a daily shopping list—we sent it by e-mail until 9.00 a.m. and at 11.00 a.m., a delivery truck left for shopping". (Respondent 111)

"(. . .) and this constant problem with medical masks—throughout the first days, we constantly wore scarves on our faces. When the leader finally got medical masks for the hotel, he provided for our entire families". (Respondent 78)

In many facilities, hotel orders were combined with private orders to reduce the need for individual purchases. Employees' unique competences were identified by organizing private lessons and helping other employees' children with their homework. Eighteen leaders took advantage of the low occupancy of hotels. They decided to lend employees unused electronic equipment and arrange work/study spaces/areas for children and parents in some hotel rooms. The parts highlighted in italics in the following statements indicate their emotional character and, thus, the importance of solving the problem from the employee's perspective.

"I couldn't help the children with their homework—I have three of them, and jumping from math to history and then suddenly to physics was beyond my strength. The manager asked us to report who could help the children and in what areas. Then we took turns doing shifts, for which the children applied: "mathematics emergency" and "language emergency". I had no idea we had brains like that before". (Respondent 15)

"I have a small apartment—2 rooms, and there are four of us. My husband worked from home; the children had remote lessons. Total confusion. We asked the boss if we could use the hotel rooms as office spaces when the hotel was closed. The idea turned out to be a great solution. We conversed 12 rooms into study rooms. Then we came up with the idea that the remaining 21 rooms could be rented as co-working spaces for external guests. They were all occupied until the end of the pandemic. Sometimes up to 80 people used such an office per one day. We only took decontamination breaks. The hotel kitchen was also satisfied—businessmen working in our rooms ordered meals for themselves, and after a few days they started ordering takeaways". (Respondent 105)

"Every morning, there was a briefing, and the leader asked if everyone was healthy, what was going on at home, and told them to report any problems. We had a big whiteboard, like in crime movies; we wrote down problems and ideas for solutions, and then we looked

in our heads for friends or contacts to help. Three people were "the crisis team"—we reported solutions to them, and they were looking for people and other resources for this". (Respondent 204)

"I was amazed by how much time the leader spent listening to our problems: children, sick mother, no painkillers. I wouldn't be surprised if he was a social person daily, but I've been working here for five years, and maybe I've talked to him twice". (Respondent 40)

Many of the above quotes also bear testimony to the importance of the "transparency and communication" (TC) criterion for employees during the crisis. The high level of indications (37% of respondents, 51% of hotels) proves a strong need for access to information and the importance of a feeling that a minimum level of control over the hotel's environment and the situation is maintained. Even negative information coming from the environment (government announcements, available statistics) was sought by the staff, and the lack of data/news deepened the feeling of being lost and helpless, as evidenced by the representative quote below:

"To me, the most important thing was honest communication [. . .]. I wanted to know where I stood, even if I had to find out we were finally closing the hotel. This uncertainty was tiring me out, and I would prefer to know how to prepare [. . .]" (Respondent 51)

"People were scared and uncertain, and the boss didn't tell us anything". (Respondent 64)

Employees were frustrated because of the lack of information about the government's further intentions regarding the prospects of opening hotels. Managers had no more information than employees, but discussing the situation in most cases was appreciated by staff and perceived as an attempt to overcome fear. Employees appreciated discussing the situation together and treating them as partners in the care of the hotel. As indicated by the parts highlighted in italics, the attitude of a leader sometimes made the situation at work easier to get used to than staying at home.

"We knew that the boss did not know more than us, but he fed us news every morning and told us what was discussed at IGHP meetings (The Chamber of Commerce of the Polish Hotel Industry). If he (had) planned any meetings (e.g., in a tourist organization), he said what topics they would discuss and what their plans were. It gave the impression that we had something under control and that there was nothing to fear. I'd rather be at work than at home. At home, everyone constantly talked about Covid statistics, however, at work we just tried to act". (Respondent 113)

Respondents also suggested the importance of two-way communication—they wanted to be listened to by leaders and, at the same time, demanded "systematic dissemination of information" (Respondent 79).

In addition to matter-of-factness and transparency, the importance of the frequency of communication was emphasized:

"The more confusion there was in the media, the more we wanted clear information from the leader [. . .]". (Respondent 160)

"I was tired of these side-by-side discussions—I wanted the boss to call us together in one place and tell us what and how [. . .]". (Respondent 118)

The method of communication (personal communication vs. e-mail) was also of great significance. Personal contact was conducive to conversation and asking questions and increased the leader's visibility. This is evidenced by the representative quote below:

"[. . .] We were waiting for a meeting so that people would hear what's next, e-mails with a cursory question about our condition caused rather an irritation. [. . .]". (Respondent 70)

Lack of communication and disregard for employees' problems often caused staff frustration. In the interviews, irritating actions were mentioned: the denigration of "weak" behavior; using coarse language to comment on the political, epidemic, or internal situation

in the hotel; holding employees accountable; affected attempts to maintain independence and authority; suggesting that the response to the virus is inflated.

"When I mentioned that disinfectant was needed, the boss got angry that I was spreading panic and that this virus was a political invention. When he saw me wearing a mask in the hallway, he always commented on it. Many people did not wear masks so as not to hear it". (Respondent 44)

"(. . .) at work, there was still tension and anger. There was no work, and the boss shouted that we were not doing anything. We started replanting the flowers, and he got angry that we were wasting our time. And there wasn't a single guest". (Respondent 61)

"I couldn't cope—all day in an empty hotel, without guests, and I was nervous about what was happening at home with the children during this time. We sat with our arms folded. The boss said that if we wanted, we could take a holiday, but he announced that he would not give us leave during the school holidays". (Respondent 99)

"The boss got angry that I had refused to make reservations, but at that time only guests on a business trip were allowed. The boss said he'd take control and I was not to bother with politics". (Respondent 156)

"Almost all of them [other employees] went to commerce or simply sat at home without work. The hotel was supposedly in debt, and we didn't get paid, no one knew what the next decisions would be. Only me and two waitresses remained out of the old staff (23 people)". (Respondent 103)

The employees assigned resilience and courage (RC) slightly lower but still significant importance. For 29% of respondents in 26% of the surveyed hotels, crisis leadership should be associated with the courage of the manager—also courage in communicating errors, ignorance, and helplessness, which resulted from most interviews.

Adaptiveness (AD), which was considered a neutral feature (not assigned to masculine or feminine leadership style), was valued quite highly by employees (appeared in 26% of interviews, in 31% of hotels). Its exceptional importance in the hotel industry during the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown period can be associated with the fact that Polish hotels were almost completely unable to operate. Although there was an exception (accommodation of people on business trips), since most enterprises switched to remote work during this period, business trips were rare, and the surveyed hotels recorded an almost complete decrease in occupancy that amounted to around 3–5%. By being unoccupied it was understood that the hotel could be closed at any moment. Not all leaders understood the importance of team spirit, and many accepted that the staff spent their days idle. In four facilities, no action was taken to change this situation.

In 16 facilities, at the employees' request, and in 12 facilities, at the request of the leader himself (herself), a concerted effort by brainstorming was made to find methods of earning money or simply any professional activity. Finally, in 14 locations, the entire staff decided to engage in the catering business, observing the growing demand for takeaway orders.

At that time, 11 facilities undertook renovation and conservation works involving the staff (thorough cleaning of the facility, refreshing the rooms, arranging a hotel playroom for children, etc.).

After prior voting by the staff, eight facilities joined in the "hotel for the medic" campaign. The campaign aimed to assure healthcare workers a temporary accommodation, thanks to which medics did not have to return home and expose their relatives to infection. However, regarding one hotel, the employees were afraid of such a solution and did not agree. This aspect shows how important it is for crisis leadership to include personnel in tactical decision-making. Presumably, most of them realized that any way to attract guests was a prerequisite for surviving the crisis, but the decision made without consulting the employees irritated them.

"(. . .) I did not know why the leader had exposed us to such a threat. If the doctors did not want to go home so as not to put their loved ones at risk, we did not want to risk it

either. After all, you had to enter such a room every day, disinfect it, prepare meals for the doctors, and talk to them. I didn't understand how you could endanger your employees like that". (Respondent 7)

"I was glad that the boss had applied for permission to open a hotel for a medic. We were terrified of this empty hotel, and now we could work normally and still feel that we were doing something that helped people. It was sad to see those exhausted nurses. They were unable to make tea in the evening". (Respondent 66)

The juxtaposition of these highly different opinions shows how important the issue of empowerment and inclusion in the decision-making process was for the staff. A similar problem arose in the case of works on the hotel premises.

"We were glad when the boss agreed to build a tennis court, volleyball court and picnic area. Some of the property should have been used for sports facilities long ago, but there was still no time. We had more than enough, and everyone was working in the garden. It was even cool while sitting in an empty hotel kind of scared us". (Respondent 32)

"I couldn't understand how you could force us to clean the garden in this weather. It was March, there was still snow, full of rotten leaves, we were afraid of colds, and the boss said we had to do something to keep from getting bored. We mainly employ women: receptionists, maids and waitresses. Why should we do garden work? Every year it was done by an external company". (Respondent 123)

Adaptation, understood as the search for new forms of earning money, new forms of activity, and new business models, was therefore rated very highly as it gave hope for keeping a job, the feeling that we could still operate, and in the case where hotels offered "hotel for medic" services, also a sense of contribution to fighting the pandemic.

Decisiveness and risk-taking (DR) was a less significant criterion, indicated in 23% of statements and 34% of hotels. Still, these indications are so significant that it is impossible to overlook the people for whom the decisiveness of managers—including precise formulation of tasks, quick and firm decision-making, and assurance that the staff will manage to overcome a difficult situation—were appreciated as signs of control over the situation.

The leader's ability to act quickly and confidently was highly valued in contrast to the wait-and-see attitude:

"In my opinion, the leader must be self-assured and decisive because if the crew sees that he does not know what he is doing and where he is going, how will he deal with confused employees [. . .] Everyone prefers a leader who simply takes responsibility". (Respondent 73)

"We desperately needed someone who could instill in us faith that everything would be fine [. . .]". (Respondent 158)

4.2. Crisis Leadership and Staff Retention

Table 6 summarizes two pieces of information for each facility: First, it considers the size of the turnover rate and its change in 2020/2019. Since the average annual turnover rate in the Polish hotel industry was (also before the COVID-19 pandemic), in general, relatively high (17.8%), it was necessary to determine what turnover rate had been observed in the surveyed hotels before the outbreak of the pandemic and how it was changing during the pandemic. The surveyed hotels are located outside larger cities (limited opportunities to look for a new job) and do not belong to hotel chains, which means that the average staff turnover in 2019 was lower than the average in the Polish hotel industry and amounted to 10.7%. Therefore, we decided that the condition for the effectiveness of crisis leadership would be met if the change in the staff turnover rate (2020/2019) in each hotel had not exceeded five percentage points.

Table 6. Average annual staff turnover vs. reported leadership style (feminine, masculine, neutral).

Hotel	2019	2020	PP Change	Leadership Style		
				F	M	N
1	12%	11%	−1%	51%	40%	9%
2	18%	29%	11%	10%	**78%**	12%
3	8%	8%	0%	67%	19%	14%
4	6%	5%	−1%	39%	**43%**	18%
5	11%	11%	0%	72%	16%	12%
6	14%	14%	0%	71%	20%	9%
7	7%	8%	1%	64%	22%	14%
8	6%	6%	0%	61%	28%	11%
9	9%	10%	1%	77%	15%	8%
10	12%	14%	2%	83%	3%	14%
11	17%	33%	16%	17%	**65%**	18%
12	13%	15%	2%	66%	9%	25%
13	10%	9%	−1%	59%	23%	18%
14	6%	12%	6%	65%	21%	14%
15	16%	28%	12%	18%	**73%**	9%
16	7%	8%	1%	57%	27%	16%
17	14%	15%	1%	61%	25%	14%
18	18%	27%	9%	56%	31%	13%
19	6%	7%	1%	66%	30%	4%
20	5%	7%	2%	71%	13%	16%
21	4%	6%	2%	57%	29%	14%
22	21%	22%	1%	81%	16%	3%
23	13%	30%	17%	33%	**54%**	13%
24	12%	11%	−1%	36%	**53%**	11%
25	11%	11%	0%	63%	23%	14%
26	8%	19%	11%	24%	**61%**	15%
27	13%	10%	−3%	77%	9%	14%
28	6%	4%	−2%	72%	14%	14%
29	14%	27%	13%	39%	**55%**	6%
30	9%	11%	2%	60%	29%	11%
31	4%	3%	−1%	77%	5%	18%
32	23%	26%	3%	43%	**44%**	13%
33	4%	5%	1%	55%	38%	7%
34	8%	7%	−1%	34%	**55%**	11%
35	10%	11%	1%	64%	27%	9%

Secondly, the percentage of collected statements indicating a neutral, masculine, or feminine leadership style perceived in each hotel was indicated. Hotel facilities where the increase in staff turnover in 2020/2019 exceeded five percentage points are marked in grey in Table 6. Conversely, blue color marks the hotels where the level of staff turnover remained almost unchanged, and at the same time most statements confirmed the adoption of a masculine leadership style.

In our research, the contextualization (presented in Table 4) of average annual staff turnover vs. interview results was extremely important. Respondents suggested that

specific dimensions of leadership were important to them, creating a sense of security, but the staff turnover rate was unexpectedly high anyway.

The analysis of the leadership style showed that in eight hotels (23%) where the change in the staff turnover rate exceeded five percentage points (2020/2019), the masculine leadership style prevailed (6 hotels: 2, 11, 15, 23, 26, 29), while the feminine style was observed only in two cases (hotel nos. 14 and 18). As a result, 77% of hotels managed to maintain the staff turnover rate in 2020 at the same level as 2019. In these hotels, the feminine leadership style was dominant (85% of hotels). However, 11% of hotels (hotel nos. 4, 24, and 34) noted an almost unchanged level of staff turnover rate, despite the dominant masculine leadership style. The exception was hotel number 32, where the proportions of indications for masculine and feminine leadership styles were almost equal (44% and 43%, respectively). However, the response rate for the neutral criterion (13%)—adaptiveness—was relatively high.

The last indicator requires in-depth research because it is difficult to consider adaptiveness unequivocally as a masculine or feminine leadership style criterion. At the same time, it should be noted that the value of this indicator in some facilities exceeded 15% (hotel numbers: 4, 12, 13, 16, 20, 31) and was positively correlated with both insignificant changes in the employees' turnover rate and a significant predominance of the feminine leadership style. Unfortunately, this correlation has not been the subject of in-depth research so far. However, it cannot be ruled out that the feminine leadership style is particularly conducive to keeping the hotel staff stable when it is supported by a high level of adaptiveness to environmental conditions.

5. Discussion

We intended to better understand leadership preferences in times of crisis compared to non-crisis periods by examining perceptions of leadership styles in 35 hotels that had experienced over 85% decline in occupancy during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. The staff turnover rate was adopted as a measure of leadership effectiveness; if it had not changed by more than five percentage points in 2019/2020, we would consider the leadership style to be effective in times of crisis.

Published research suggests that when threats become overwhelming, individuals in a group expect leaders to centralize authority and take decisive action [61–63]. Research by Ryan et al. [64] suggests that masculine characteristics are more desirable when crisis leadership tasks are required (e.g., influencing the rapid improvement of financial results). However, there is a preference for more feminine qualities when a manager is required to lead people in crisis situations. According to a number of research studies, decision-making in times of crisis should not be shared/dispersed since employees prefer a strong type of leadership. Some research also suggests that more power and less open consultations tend to be used in both crisis and non-crisis situations [65].

The results of our study dismiss the notion that crisis leadership requires authoritarian and highly centralized leadership that focuses on quick action and low delegation of authority. Respondents' statements indicate that crisis leadership requires collective and inclusive decision-making and stakeholder cooperation, which was reflected in staff retention.

However, the results of our research indicate that a highly authoritarian and centralized leadership focused on quick and independent managerial decision-making and no empowerment proved difficult for respondents to accept during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. The respondents' statements show that they expected collective and inclusive decision-making and stakeholder cooperation. Such attitudes of leaders translated into higher staff morale, higher resilience in a crisis situation, and greater solidarity in action and, as a result, were reflected in staff retention.

Based on previous studies [36,66–68], researchers arbitrarily assigned specific criteria to the feminine (F) or masculine (M) leadership style, while in one case (Adaptiveness), the criterion was considered neutral (N). Like some previous studies [36,69], the results of our study confirm that the group of feminine leadership attributes including teamwork

processes traditionally associated with femininity such as prioritizing interpersonal relationships, expressing emotions, and paying attention to personal and socio-emotional factors that go beyond economic and financial aspects are of particular importance to the majority of respondents.

Preference statistics show that respondents most often cited "inclusivity, collaboration, and empowerment" (ICE); "empathy and care" (EC); and "transparency and communication" (TC) as desirable examples of leaders' activities. The results suggest that respondents preferred a feminine leadership style, at least in times of crisis. Masculine attributes of crisis leadership, i.e., "resilience and courage" (RC) and "decisiveness and risk-taking" (DR) were indicated less frequently. An interesting result was a significant pool of responses indicating the search for various methods of adaptive leadership. It is difficult to unequivocally classify adaptiveness (AD) as a feminine or masculine leadership attribute. However, the effects of AD were indicated particularly in hotels with a high level of ICE and TC.

This does not mean that the masculine leadership style is not important for hotel employees—in several cases, most responses indicating RC and DR were recorded in hotels that maintained a high level of staff stability.

Overall, the results give a clear picture of a crisis leader who demonstrates a high level of concern for employees, pays attention to both professional and emotional issues of his or her staff, maintains a high level of staff collaboration and empowerment, and maintains regular, honest, and transparent communication. The qualitative findings support and build upon these findings, highlighting a preference for an additional important element of crisis leadership—adaptiveness.

It is especially noteworthy that the study was carried out in a very homogeneous group of enterprises: small- and medium-sized off-chain hotels located in Poland. The research results should be verified by including franchise hotels in the research pool, where quite different work relationships are adopted; the bond between the staff and the manager is probably much less strong. Another variable that was not included in the research is the facility's location (large vs. small towns). Larger cities offer a much wider choice of jobs, so the likelihood of staff searching for a new job during lockdown would be more significant, regardless of the leader's efforts.

It is also impossible to omit the fact that the dominant group of employees are women of childbearing age, which on the one hand affects their willingness to change jobs, and on the other hand affects the preferred attributes of crisis leadership style. Perhaps a strongly masculinized work environment would display a clearer tendency towards masculine leadership style preferences.

The literature on leadership during financial crises stresses the importance of leadership aspects such as prompt decision-making [5,16]. In our research, preferences for masculine leadership attributes were displayed less frequently. However, in-depth interviews revealed the importance of such features as daring decision-making and a clear display of expectations towards the employees. A simple interpretation of the quantitative data would probably not provide such a detailed insight into respondents' desires in times of a pandemic crisis.

Our results verify the findings from earlier literature that suggest that all leaders are expected to display androgynous traits [67,69,70] and high levels of emotional intelligence [71–74] in that people who are able to transcend gender stereotypes and identify with both stereotypically feminine and stereotypically masculine traits are potentially the most effective leaders. Thus, qualitative research reveals a complex picture of the desired crisis leader, which would be difficult to present using unambiguous quantitative measures [75,76].

In retrospect, an unequivocal assessment of the effectiveness of the adopted leadership styles in Polish hotels (two years after the pandemic) meets with a significant obstacle, which was another crisis (this time political) related to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This caused a sharp decline in hotel occupancy in the first four months of the war (March–June

2022), when inbound tourism to Poland as well as domestic tourism in the eastern part of Poland dropped drastically.

The most general conclusion from the conducted research is that the leader's inability to adopt a crisis leadership style and quickly adapt to the staff's expectations may have a detrimental effect on the hotel more than the crisis itself [77]. Hotels, which undertook immediate adaptation measures, quickly managed to find a new way to engage staff, obtain a new source of revenue (transformation of the business model), and above all, stabilize the staff and reduce their tendency to leave the workplace.

6. Future Research

Research the crisis leadership certainly requires an analysis into different types of crises; recent years have been characterized by one of the largest financial crises (2008–2011), which had a strong impact on the hotel industry, followed by two epidemics (SARS and COVID-19), and a political crisis (war in Ukraine). One would expect that each crisis requires a different response and thus a different leadership style. Moreover, this study does not analyze successive phases of crisis leadership [78] but only staff turnover.

Future research should continue to explore leadership styles in all contexts, and even if carried out exclusively in hotels should incorporate hotels owned by international franchise chains.

It would also be advisable, apart from analyzing the impact of leadership on staff turnover, to study the perception of leadership from the perspective of women and men employed in the organization and to determine the extent to which a specific style of crisis leadership (male or female) can be correlated with the gender of the leader.

7. Conclusions

This study provides an up-to-date and innovative contribution to the areas of leadership and staff turnover in the hospitality industry from the perspective of transformational leadership theory that seems particularly valuable in crisis situations. While generalized statements about effective leadership that work in any crisis would be problematic, the leadership lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic may throw light on some of the key attributes and applicable skills that future leaders will need to develop to endure any future crisis, especially when there are no tried and tested methods, with little information on how to deal with a real crisis.

Our research has a chance to at least partially fill this research gap due to the fact that it covered off-chain hotels located outside larger cities, often being one of the most important employers in the region, and at the same time devoid of access to a broad labor market. As a result, hotel managers anticipating the need of post-pandemic recovery had to take special care of the morale of the staff, being aware of the fact that it will not be easy to reclaim employees with highly desirable competences. Based on the theory of transformational leadership, we undertook to examine the degree to which the leadership styles were desirable and conducive to the actual retention of staff.

The study represents a modest contribution to research on crisis leadership in relation to service industries (tourism), where staff competences still determine the competitive advantage of the company. The effects of inappropriate and unresponsive leadership in such industries can quickly lead to the outflow of staff, which will be difficult to replace in the course of work mechanization or even by hiring new employees. The ambition of this study was to fill the research gap regarding the link between the preferred (by employees) style of crisis leadership and one of the most important dimensions of the effectiveness of the service enterprise, i.e., enhancing staff retention. In the service industry, the importance of this aspect cannot be overstated due to the long time it takes to acquire and perfect the competences necessary in interactions with guests/clients.

Despite the limitations presented earlier, which may be the basis for future research in the field of effective crisis leadership, the research we conducted allowed us to validate the research hypotheses.

While leadership has long been associated with masculine attributes, our research shows that the COVID-19 crisis was a critical time for leaders to assume transformational leadership moving towards the soft aspects of management (feminine or androgynous leadership styles), drawing on the full portfolio of behaviors available to leaders. The findings presented here prompt practitioners to consider the need to incorporate a transformational perspective into organizational practices and interventions in order to promote leadership effectiveness. Moreover, our findings open up the research agenda for practitioners, suggesting that the transformational leadership style helps to improve the organization's effectiveness through greater staff involvement, empowerment, and lowering employee turnover. It also helps to relieve the leader (also emotionally) as (s)he struggles with both personal anxieties and lack of experience in crisis situations and bears responsibility for the team's and organization's survival.

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