

Article

Building resilient leadership: A study exploring leadership development during uncertainty

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Abstract: Effective small and medium enterprise (SME) leadership demands creative solutions to ensure organisations survive and thrive during the turbulent times that COVID-19 continues to bring. This paper explores how SME leaders (in micro and small organisations) prioritise and access the skills and development needed to provide effective and sustainable leadership to organisations, focusing on the role of resilience and the benefits it provides. Participants were selected through purposive and snowballing sampling. Online surveys and semi-structured interviews were conducted and provided qualitative data that contributes to an understanding of the role of resilience and the view of participants as to what is needed to effectively respond to a dynamic environment. Evidence shows that SME leaders prioritise learning and development opportunities that provide demonstrable benefits throughout the organisation. Building business resilience remains a fuzzy concept; however, viewing resilience as a multi-level construct offers benefits when designing and delivering development opportunities. It has been found that networking, partnerships, and relationship building promote resilience and may offer a solution to how to embed resilience building into development opportunities that SME leaders value and wish to engage with. This article contributes by illustrating and exploring leadership development within SMEs during a period of unexpected and untested uncertainty. The pandemic caused major shock waves within business communities, and SMEs were significantly affected. The research is limited in that it is expected to be a once-in-a lifetime event, and as such conditions may not be replicable, learning opportunities for other ‘shock’ events are possible. The findings of this paper have relevance to practice in that, while the event may be one-off, shocks to the business environment are not.

Keywords: leadership; SMEs (small medium enterprise); learning and development; resilience

1. Introduction

There has been much consideration, research, and writing regarding the leadership challenge since March 2020, when the UK (United Kingdom) faced the first COVID-19 lockdown and the world began to seek answers to the challenges that the pandemic brought. While it may be accepted that the leadership requirements of the current environment may be different from those required in years gone by, are the drivers of these new leadership requirements actually something new and unprecedented? This paper views the leadership requirement as not being as radical or diverse as has been suggested, but rather that the world and the economic landscape have always faced change and disruption. The world has faced war, natural disasters, and numerous man-made crises throughout the centuries that have resulted in disruption, change, and impact on daily lives. While this research acknowledges the

global impact of the pandemic, it also recognises that various sections of the global population have previously experienced significant disruption and developed strategies to manage such disruption. By viewing disruption as unplanned change and accepting that successfully managing change is an integral part of leadership, the perspective of the leadership requirement is narrowed, and the contribution of resilience as a key skill can be considered.

Therefore, if leadership can adopt the perspective of an ever-changing environment as the norm, then the focus required is one that encourages a consideration of what lessons were learned from the key events of the past and how leaders can equip themselves, building resilience, to meet the challenge of the VUCA world. It is widely recognised that effective leadership within SMEs positively influences organisational outcomes; however, what is less certain is the skillset required of leaders to be 'effective' and respond to the complexity of the contemporary business environment. This research identifies the impact of on-going challenges for SME business leaders in the North of England and considers the increased need for a responsive skillset to address these challenges. It was reported that 3.7 million SME owners experienced stress during the first 12 months of the pandemic, with 3.3 million suffering from anxiety and 1.8 million having depression (Simply Business, 2021). The local government agency (LGA) and the Association of Directors of Public Health (ADPH) (Public Health England, 2021) reported similar short-term impacts with recommendations that mental health be considered in designing service responses to the pandemic.

Business leaders were required to provide creative solutions to ensure businesses survived the turbulent times that COVID-19 brought and continues to bring. This paper provides insight into how SME leaders (in micro and small organisations) prioritise and access the skills needed to provide effective and sustainable leadership to organisations. The importance of a thriving SME sector within economies is critical to economic health and prosperity. This empirical study provides a lens into the SME sector and asks, "What skills and development do SME leaders prioritise as necessary to lead effectively in uncertain times."

2. Literature review

This review of the literature considers the challenges of delivering effective leadership development that produces sustainable and effective leadership. Leadership training is focused on developing "members to effectively engage in leadership roles and processes (Day, 2000, p. 582, cited in Lacerenza et al. (2017)), and this literature review will consider leadership development and training rather than management training. The managerial, practical nature of leading a SME and the mix of managerial and leadership tasks involved (Kotter, 1990) are recognised, as is the distinction between managerial and leadership development. The review will consider perspectives on effective leadership, leadership training and development, and how leading a SME may produce distinct challenges and provoke debate when considering the traditional view of leadership development. The requirement for resilience at multiple levels within organisations is discussed, with a focus on what qualities and skills may contribute to resilience.

2.1. Effective and sustainable leadership in 2023 and beyond

SMEs provide employment for three-fifths of the UK private sector and account for around half of all UK economic turnover (Department for Business, Energy, and Industrial Strategy, 2021). However, this valuable sector was disproportionately affected by the pandemic, with more SMEs forced to pause or cease trading than larger businesses (Office for National Statistics, 2022). Furthermore, it is widely reported that many SMEs fail within the first 12 months of trading, suggesting a low level of success and sustainability in responding to change that may be influenced by the skillset present in management and leadership (Imran and Aldass, 2020). The requirement to meet the challenges that SMEs face demands that leaders of these organisations to be adaptive and flexible to effectively respond to a rapidly changing environment (Husti and Mahyarni, 2019).

Effective leadership during the first UK COVID-19 lockdown was found to demonstrate authenticity, provide vision, and deliver a shared purpose through a collaboration that harnessed the skills and abilities within the organisation (Walsh and Johnston, 2022). Kotter (1990) observes that effective leadership is viewed as the ability of leaders to facilitate “adaptive change” (p. 5) and the moving of people to a place where the impact is favourable for those affected, ensuring that others are not negatively affected by these actions. Effective leaders create vision and can encourage and empower the members of an organisation to commit to that vision (Conger, 1999), and by doing so, effective leadership increases the commitment, motivation, and performance of the workforce (Lowe et al., 1996). The creation and communication of vision and the impact of this shared vision on performance are viewed as effective leadership by Drucker (1985). SME leaders, often referred to as entrepreneurs, create organisations from their own creativity, ideas, passion, and drive and are often viewed as innovators or problem-solvers, which correlates to many of the perspectives on leadership that research has provided. Drucker (1985) viewed entrepreneurship as innovation that invests in existing resources to create new wealth-making capacity (Fontana and Musa, 2017).

While entrepreneurship and leadership are used interchangeably to describe the qualities of a SME owner, according to a view shared by Vecchio (2003), entrepreneurial leadership is a specific style of leadership that presents as “a combination of entrepreneurial approach... with the capability... to deal with vulnerable market situations” with their response to change being found to be higher than other leadership styles (Imran and Aldass, 2020, p. 380). The ‘hands on’ nature of leading an SME reflects many of the qualities of entrepreneurial leadership; therefore, SME leaders could be viewed as possessing an organic mix of skills present in managerial leadership and entrepreneurial orientation leadership (Musa and Fontana, 2014).

A dynamic and demanding environment requires leadership that can adapt and flex to respond to the challenges that are presented. However, evidence suggests that this may prove challenging, with over half of leaders (54%) only ever implementing one style of leadership regardless of the demands of the situation, organization, or changing environmental context (Blanchard, 1997, cited in Price-Dowd (2020)). While the research of Blanchard could be considered pre-pandemic or dated, it is

pertinent to restate the view of this paper that a VUCA world is not confined to a post-pandemic environment.

However, when the environment is evolving and responding, the challenges are unknown, and organisations and individuals must begin to identify a skillset that may respond effectively. An effective leader is required to respond (and to respond again) as the wider environment demands.

2.2. The need for resilience in uncertain times

Definitions of resilience offer explanations that include buoyancy, the ability to spring back, rebound, and the ability to recover and return to an original state, and therefore it has become a much sought-after commodity for leaders and organisations. It appears that ‘the quest for resilience’ (Hamel and Välikangas, 2003) could return a valuable treasure, but the question remains: what is resilience, is it innate or can it be developed, and if so, where can it be found? Bhamra et al. (2011) define resilience as the capability to return to a stable state after disruption. It is suggested that resilience can be built using networks, relationships, and interactions and therefore can be developed through established strong and meaningful connections with others that are built selectively and take time (Cross et al., 2021).

As part of a wider endeavour to introduce ‘positive organisational behaviour’ Luthans explores confidence, hope, and resilience in his paper ‘The need for and meaning of positive organizational behavior’ (2002), arguing both its relevance and potential for effective leadership and acknowledging the capacity of resilience to deal with adversity, uncertainty, and change (p. 702). Furthermore, it is identified that resilience can offer effective responses to the ‘fuzzier’ (p. 702) environment through “social competence, problem-solving, autonomy, and a sense of purpose and belief in a bright future” (Benard, 1991, p. 7). However, the work of Benard (1991) was intended to inform prevention strategies in children and young people and so raises questions regarding the ‘learning’ of resilience and how, as adults, these skills and competencies can be acquired if they are not already present. However, what may be clearer is the observation that resilience is considered a skill required in response to events, situations, and changes. Resilience may be considered a crucial component of a leadership contingency toolkit, presenting further opportunities for sustainable and effective leadership in the workplace when the capacity to ‘bounce back’ (Luthans 2002, p. 702) is required. Alongside this is the leadership crisis wheel (Walsh and Johnston, 2022), which identifies authenticity, ethical practice, and leadership by example as key components during times of uncertainty.

Resilience is required (and is arguably more effective) at an individual, socio-ecological, and organisational level, creating a multi-level framework that promotes resilient behaviours in employees that improve outcomes at each of the levels (Visser and Jacobs, 2019, p. 4). This offers a pragmatic solution to the acquisition of resilience in leaders, as resilience is being developed and improved within the leader, within the organisation and within the wider environment, therefore offering multiple levels of resilience to draw from should one level be weaker due to challenge and circumstance. Greene et al. (2002) suggest that the relationship between organisational and individual resilience is formally arranged and that organisations that display resilience

employ resilient individuals to create a culture that responds effectively to change and uncertainty. Furthermore, by influencing individuals and immersing them in a resilient culture, it is suggested that their leadership development is positively impacted and resilience is fostered (Ledesma, 2014).

2.3. Leadership development, skills, and learning

The positive impact of implementing a multi-level approach to resilience has been explored in the previous section (2.2) within this review; however, when considering how leadership development and learning can be implemented, further exploration of elements of a multi-level approach is necessary. The value and significance of support networks and developing resilient cultures must be considered when designing opportunities for leaders to learn (Ledesma, 2014). Learning can be found through collaboration and partnerships that not only promote resilience but also reduce feelings of isolation, hardship, stress, and failure, therefore producing positive and sustainable outcomes for individuals (leaders) and the organisations (Ledesma, 2014), thus contributing to the development of organisational culture.

Organisations are increasingly investing in leadership training and development opportunities (Gibler et al., 2020; Ho, 2016), and whilst many perceive these training opportunities and programmes as ineffective, there is evidence to suggest that this perception may be inaccurate and that most leadership training provided leads to improvements and positive outcomes at organisational, individual, and subordinate levels (Lacerenza et al., 2017, p. 1707). Furthermore, the research from Lacerenza et al. (2017) provides eight evidence-based best practices for “Designing a Leadership Training Program” (p. 1704) that include the acknowledgement that development should not be viewed as training because effective leaders develop rather than are trained, and highlight the importance of consultation to ensure the relevance of the programme matches and meets the needs of the leaders, therefore avoiding a one-size-fits-all approach. (Lacerenza, 2017, p. 1704).

Delivering bespoke leadership development programmes is not without challenges, as it suggests a higher level of resource investment from organisations. There are also implications for how training needs are identified and the use of training needs analyses to identify the needs and seek a programme able to align with those needs (Arthur et al., 2003). There is little research available that provides insight into who identifies needs and if tension exists between the priorities and preferences of organisational and individual needs. If such tension is present, consideration is required as to the implications of such decision-making. However, if a multi-level response can be woven into the analysis of needs, this has the potential to reduce tension in identifying needs and improve individual and organisational alignment through improved communications and alignment of expectations.

Much leadership development research has adopted a functionalist perspective, which seeks to identify how development opportunities can improve both individual (leader) and organisational effectiveness (Carroll, 2019). Leaders are formal and legitimate, appointed within an organisation that assumes that by improving skills, competencies, and abilities, the leadership function will more greatly affect and positively impact, with leadership development notably defined as “an expansion of a

person's capability to be effective in a leadership role and process" (Van Velsor et al., 2010, as cited in Kjellstrom et al. (2020, p. 437)). The development of entrepreneurs and SME leaders requires a broader consideration beyond the formal parameters of the functionalist perspective. It becomes necessary to consider the context and complexities that may be present in the diverse SME community, including the industry sector, available resources, access to funding and support, and the need for the SME owner to benefit from understanding and identifying their own learning needs and preferences.

2.4. The significance of resilience in mental health wellbeing

In 2020, as the UK entered the first lockdown, it was reported that business owners and entrepreneurs were struggling to mentally deal with the impact of COVID-19 (Van Bortel et al., 2021). These findings are unsurprising when considering several publications in the British Medical Association (BMA) that highlighted the potential consequences of the impact of COVID-19 on the general population, with many people developing mental health symptoms and illnesses for the first time in 2020. The UK government made a range of financial resources available to support organisations within the business community in March 2020; however, it took longer for support to be offered to those whose mental health was impacted by the changes that were covered in 19. YouGov opened a survey in March 2020, with over 4000 participants taking part in regular and repeated surveys. The YouGov survey reported that a third of all participants were worrying regularly about finance and debt, with 'middle-aged participants' expressing the most concern about their financial situation (Van Bortel et al., 2021). Of those whose mental health was affected during this time, 3.7 million SME owners experienced stress in the first year of COVID-19 restrictions, 3 million reported anxiety, and 1.8 million experienced depression (Simply Business, 2021). Similar impacts were also reported by research conducted by the Local Government Agency and Public Health England (2021).

A lack of resilience has been "associated with burnout and other health problems" (Visser and Jacobs, 2019, p. 4) and compassion fatigue (Rees et al., 2015), establishing the relationship between the absence or lack of individual resilience and negative outcomes for mental health wellbeing. A strong link between well-being and productivity in SME workers was reported by Chowdhury et al. (2021), who found increased job satisfaction resulted in increased productivity. 82% of SME owners reported mental health issues similar to those within their workforce; however, SME leaders were reluctant to seek support, with the reluctance emerging from self-perceptions of decreased value, weakness, and incompetence (Calvert and Tehrani, 2021). Other factors that present a barrier to accessing appropriate support that may be relevant to this paper include technological barriers and being ill at ease with using phone and online sources of support. De Angelis et al. (2020) discuss the EU's H2020 H-Work project's aims of promoting mental health to SMEs recognising the lack of resources available to SMEs can make them the most susceptible for mental health wellbeing issues. The EU H2020 H-Work Project provides multi-level interventions for mental health and public organisations and SMEs (H-Work, 2023), reporting

benefits in implementing support through a multi-level response that combines theoretical knowledge with practical solutions (De Angelis et al., 2020).

A multi-staged approach to mental wellbeing is also offered by the work of Cinar and Bilodeau (2022) and delivered through the creation of a 5-staged Resilience and Agility Building model for Health and Mental Wellbeing (Cinar, 2021). This research considers the requirement for wellbeing, agility, and resilience to be intertwined and presents the findings of Cinar (2021), who offers self-awareness, self-management, lifestyle management, social awareness management, and a high level of fulfilment as the five elements required for building resilience and agility. Of interest to this research is the acknowledgement that learning and development must be sustainable and tailored, with ‘mental resilience and agility’ delivered through collaboration and inclusivity recognised as being effective in responding to ‘unexpected and complex’ events (Cinar and Bilodeau, 2022), which is pertinent in 2023 and beyond.

Research by Jayawardana and Gannon (2021) into the Australian Better Access Initiative Programme provides an insight into the issues surrounding the use of technology and the different preferences of differing demographic groups when accessing services, which is of interest to this research paper. The research found a variance in the uptake of appointments that related to gender, age, and geographical area differences, and while further research into these variables would be beneficial, what is implied is that differences are present and have an impact on engagement with services. A clear and current insight into these preferences resulting from consultation would increase the likelihood of successful engagement with support and development opportunities and therefore provide a valuable insight into a contributing factor for how leaders may prioritise opportunities for development and support and understanding “what skills and development do SME leaders prioritise as necessary to lead effectively in uncertain times.”

2.5. Conclusion

As such, the literature suggests that it is important to recognise the ongoing and ever-evolving nature of turbulence and change. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, while catastrophic in many ways, was and is another period of turmoil and instability that impacted the business environment. Born out of it remains a need to consider sustainability, resilience, and well-being within organisations. The need to adopt a multi-level approach is well highlighted, as are mechanisms to support the development of leaders and leadership in SMEs.

This paper addresses the recognition of this need to understand how this is achieved within the SME environment.

3. Methods

This small-scale, exploratory research sought the opinions and views of small medium enterprise (SME) owners (also referred to as leaders for the purpose of this paper) in Northern England to inform a planned delivery of support services to the SME owners by local partnership agencies. The partnership between a unitary authority council and a local university was created to identify the needs of small business owners and deliver a bespoke range of support services, including a wellbeing

offer, to the SME community. The data was collected during a three-month period in the spring of 2021, a year after the first UK pandemic lockdown. The research design of this paper is influenced by the recognition and understanding of the unprecedented circumstances that influence the research and the research question:

“What skills and development do SME leaders prioritise as necessary to lead effectively in uncertain times.”

Furthermore, the following issues are of significance and have influenced the design of the research: the ongoing restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 global pandemic in the UK, including social movement restrictions and legislation; the diverse range of challenges and priorities for a diverse range of SMEs (Bacon and Hoque, 2005); the requirements of the research funding organisation, and the range of development opportunities available that could be delivered online or as a hybrid model of delivery.

A qualitative, interpretivist approach is adopted, offering the opportunity to understand “real-world settings” (Patton, 2002, p. 39) and reflecting the importance of the participants experiences and the context in which the research is conducted. Numeric data is collected to establish an understanding of the key characteristics of the SME owner, such as the age and gender of the participant. The purpose of this data is to provide context and background to the research findings, and while the research may be considered mixed-methods in design, it is firmly rooted in an interpretivist approach and the development of an understanding of the lived experiences of the participants. The value of this approach is best summarised as allowing us to “focus not just on ‘what’ but on ‘how’” (Teti et al., 2020, cited in Vindrola-Padros (2020)).

Two semi-structured interviews were held online (via Teams) with key members of staff within two of the gatekeeper organisations. These participants were identified by the formal position that they held within each of the gatekeeper organisations (for example, coordinator or manager). Open-ended, semi-structured interviews encourage a retelling of the participant's story and provide insight into their knowledge (Demarrais, 2004).

The SME sector is diverse, and there are a broad range of variables to consider when attempting to categorise organisations. This research has collected data from a range of businesses that are early stage innovative, established early start-ups, or established businesses, which are all locally focused and considered micro (less than 10 employees) or small (less than 50 employees) businesses within the SME sector (Albaz et al., 2020).

A purposive, snowballing approach (Goodman, 1961) was adopted to enable the online survey, containing a mix of quantitative and qualitative, to be delivered through three gatekeeper organisations that distributed the survey to their members via email. Each of these gatekeeper organisations provides membership services to entrepreneurs and small business owners through a programme of support, guidance, and networking. This approach aimed to be effective in managing the limited resources available while reaching a targeted audience and offering a high level of anonymity to participants, which is of significance when researching potentially sensitive topic areas (Parker et al., 2019).

Online surveys have success when the questions being asked can be potentially sensitive to the participants, and this method was chosen as it can result in higher

participation (Wright, 2005). The survey was designed to capture the lived experiences and opinions of the participants during a challenging and emotive time in many people's lives. Therefore, care was taken to ensure that questions were clearly worded to avoid leading participants, reduce the capacity for any misinterpretation, and ensure that the expectations of participants regarding the purpose of the research and the intended outcomes were managed. While the use of a gatekeeper provided participants with potential reassurance regarding their anonymity when taking part in research regarding their mental health and wellbeing, it also presented challenges to the recruitment of the sample. However, this method restricted the ability to encourage take-up of the survey and may have contributed to the low rate of completed surveys. However, the survey approach was designed to produce rich qualitative data and enable the sharing of experiences, so the design remains both suitable and beneficial. The credibility of data findings is increased using multiple data sources (surveys and interviews), contributing to accuracy and a truthful reflection of the findings (Yin, 2003).

The data collected from the two semi-structured interviews and 45 survey participants was analysed to provide valuable insight into the research question, "What skills and development do leaders prioritise as necessary to lead effectively in uncertain times." The initial findings were shared with the funders according to the agreed-upon prompt time limits to facilitate an appropriate and responsive range of services to be offered to the SME community within the local geographical area.

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data sets to identify themes and patterns that were relevant to the overall research aim, seeking links between the variables (such as age and gender) and the data provided. The interview and survey story data were also analysed using a thematic approach with consideration for the prominent issue raised by Braun and Clarke (2006) regarding the creation of themes with reference to size or frequency. This research adopts a flexible approach to the determination of themes and seeks to provide themes rooted in the significance of the data rather than the prevalence.

4. Findings

The purpose of this research was to discover "what skills and development do SME leaders prioritise as necessary to lead effectively in uncertain times" by implementing an online survey for SME owners and conducting two interviews with staff members of gatekeeper organisations. The following section presents the findings of the online survey, and this data is represented by the code SME, followed by a number (SME 1, SME 2, and so on), when the survey participants have chosen to share their stories and experiences through providing answers to open-ended questions included in the survey. The code G1 or G2 is used to identify the data provided from the two semi-structured interviews.

4.1. Participant characteristics

Of the 45 survey respondents, 59% identified as male and 41% identified as female. Participants were invited to identify their age using age banding that reflected some of the funding opportunities available to business startups, with 1 participant

identifying as belonging to the 18–30-year-old group. 23% of participants were from the 31–45-year-old band, and over half (53%) were aged 46–60 years. Almost a quarter (23%) of the participants were over 60 years old.

Participants were then asked to identify the industry that best represented their business. Service organisations made up almost half of the data returned, and retail accounted for a third of responses. Hospitality was 11%, and leisure businesses made up 7%. G2 confirmed that the “majority of members (participants)... a high percentage” employ others.

Participants were invited to identify what had motivated them to be self-employed (to lead an SME), and the results are shown in **Table 1** below:

Table 1. Motivation for running own business.

| | |
|--|-----------|
| My skills, qualities and experiences influenced me to run my own business | 27% (30) |
| I have always wanted to run my own business | 20% (22) |
| I am self-employed because it fits with my work life balance | 19% (21) |
| I am self-employed because it allows me creativity | 18% (20) |
| I haven’t really thought about why I am self-employed, it is just ‘what I do’ | 7% (8) |
| It was the only opportunity available to me, with my skills, in the local job market | 3.5% (4) |
| I am self-employed because my family commitments require it | 3.5% (4) |
| I am self-employed because I am unable to access available and/or affordable childcare | 1.75% (2) |

4.2. Mental health wellbeing

The survey asked if, in the previous 12 months, the participants had experienced any mental health issues because of the changes that COVID-19 brought. The question offered the following suggested changes: appetite changes, altered sleep patterns, increased anxiety, and a lower mood. 69% of respondents stated they had experienced a mental health or wellbeing issue.

66% of respondents reported that the mental health or wellbeing issue had impacted aspects of their working lives, such as their ability to work, their ability to support colleagues and/or employees, their concentration, and their motivation. G2 said that the leaders have “concerns about employees mental health... and at no point refer to their own mental health... you are way down the list... it’s about keeping the show on the road”.

4.3. Working lives during a pandemic

Participants were invited to share aspects of their stories, and the survey asked, ‘Tell us about the issues affecting your working life that you have experienced as a result of COVID-19’.

SME1 runs a consulting business and shared that “I have of course pivoted and developed innovative new products, but... there has been no real help... there is no let-up as I have to keep going”.

SME2 reported that their managerial judgment had become “clouded” because of stress and “emotional swings” which had resulted in “difficult decisions with staff... being unable to support my manager fully or in a timely manner”.

Other participants reported issues with “focus,” “feelings of or being overwhelmed,” “uncertainty” and “juggling responsibilities.”

However, some participants had stories of optimism to share, with SME3 reporting that “resilience helps me find a way forward, and things now are very much brighter”. SME4 shared, “I chose ‘to get rid of the old’ and so have a new website, and new printed material... I took the three lockdowns as opportunities to clear out and sort through my business, which had COVID-19 not happened, I would not have been able to do. Always look for the positives, particularly in negative situations! Perhaps that’s why I didn’t experience mental health issues.” G2 reported that some of their membership “within a period of 3 days (in March 2020)... they had pivoted and diversified” and that the sector had demonstrated “huge amounts of creativity.”

SME5 acknowledged the demands of running an SME without additional challenges of COVID-19 and said, “Running your own business is immensely stressful, and it’s not easy to apportion responsibility for diminished wellbeing to just COVID-19.”

4.4. Accessing support

Participants were asked, “Have you sought mental health support during the last 12 months for issues relating to, or because of, the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic”. 91% of all respondents said they had not sought support, and only 9% (representing 4 participants) had sought mental health support for issues relating to appetite changes, altered sleep patterns, increased anxiety, and a lower mood.

G1 explained that SMEs and entrepreneurs often face a range of barriers to accessing support that can be complex and “often more complicated than a larger business... there is an attitude towards then that increases the pressure, as there is a presumption that they (SMEs and entrepreneurs) don’t have the big challenges that big business does,” when the reality can be that they have fewer resources, time, and support and access to specialist support than larger businesses. G1 also expressed that many of the entrepreneurs they had talked with were “resigned to the difficulties after six months... and lived under pressure for so long...”. This view was shared by G2, who shared a story of a SME leader who had chosen not to access support for a situation because they prioritised the needs of the business and suggested that leadership development in SME leaders requires a recognition that there needs to be “an investment in self to invest in the business”.

4.5. Identifying development and support

Participants were invited to select from a range of support services that they would be interested in accessing, and they were able to select more than one service. The total responses are shown in **Table 2** below and show that acquiring new business skills such as diversification training, digital marketing, and data analytics was the highest priority for 26.32% of responses. In contrast, counselling, stress management, and anger management, all services that directly focus on providing emotional support services, received a combined response of almost 16%.

Table 2. SME owners self-selected development needs.

| | |
|---|-------------|
| Business skills e.g., digital marketing, data analysis, marketing, diversification, mentoring employees | 26.25% (15) |
| 1 to 1 mentoring | 22.75% (13) |
| Coaching | 21% (12) |
| Group Work and Support | 12.25% (7) |
| Counselling | 8.75% (5) |
| Stress Management | 7% (4) |
| Anger Management | 0% (0) |
| Other (not specified) | 1.75% (1) |

This finding was supported when talking with G1, who reported that despite the fact that “people who ask for support do better in business,” many entrepreneurs do not view the support available as “for them” and instead view development and training opportunities as something that “executives and the c-suite” engage in. G1 also suggested that participants may not recognise their experiences as ‘stress’ and instead “may identify fatigue and certain troubling issues but not necessarily identify them as stress”. G1 was asked how engagement with support and development opportunities could be encouraged, and the use of third-party intermediaries was suggested, such as accountants, business growth advisors, and groups such as the Federation of Small Business. In the words of G1, “get others to sell it” and focus on how it will benefit the business, something that will improve their business - “a bottom-line benefit”. G2 discussed how their gatekeeper organisation had been able to offer business coaching to the membership and said that “we had 12 out of 210 members take up free business coaching over a 9-month period.”

Participants were then invited to contribute anything that they felt would be useful to aid understanding of what may be required to support SME and the impact of the pandemic on working lives. SME 6 shared, “Access to business/networking/introduction etc. There are too many coaching/unhelpful webinars around when what we need is to get access to people who want to get work done.”

5. Discussion

5.1. SME leader characteristics

While the gender and age of the participants in the sample are not explored in depth as part of this research, it is recognised that differences in training and development needs may exist that may be attributable to gender. Previous research has indicated that gender is one of the variable factors that can impact the uptake of online services (Jayawardana and Gannon, 2021) and is identified as a key consideration when discussing learning and development delivery methods.

The participants are leaders in SMEs that offer goods and services (the range of services is diverse and can include accounting, finance, personal trainer and fitness coaching, dog walking, and many more), run retail outlets, hotels, bed and breakfasts/guest houses, pubs, cafes and restaurants, and events and experience organisations. The training needs within each of these businesses may be considered diverse due to the nature of the organisation. The research question considers the skills

needed to lead these organisations in uncertain times, and so while the data is useful to provide context and an overview of the participant characteristics and confirm the diversity and complexity of the organisations that make up the SME sector (Bacon and Hoque, 2005), it will not be discussed in depth. Service organisation leaders made up almost half of the survey data returned, and retail leaders accounted for a third of the survey responses. Hospitality organisations returned 11% of the survey data, and leisure businesses made up the remaining 7% of the survey data.

All survey participants were asked about their motivations for ‘running their own business.’ The question was developed following comments made by G1 in their interview. G1 had discussed the complexity of the reasons that people choose to become self-employed and that, because of some of these motivators, not all entrepreneurs view themselves as leaders. The question was not phrased to include leadership or entrepreneurship to avoid leading the participants responses. The question invited respondents to select all that apply, and of the 45 total respondents, two-thirds (30 participants) felt that the skills, qualities, and experiences that they had influenced them to run their own business. 22 participants stated they had always wanted to run their own business. These findings contribute to the work that considers the importance of understanding leadership style, developing one’s own understanding of leadership when leading, and the implications this has for personal development (Price-Dowd, 2020).

Leaders that can recognise and candidly identify their skillset demonstrate an awareness of the importance of leadership style and delivery that could be considered important in meeting both organisation and individual needs. Knowing who leaders are and developing an understanding of how this approach to leadership impacts those around us could be considered a key skill in contemporary organisations (Price-Dowd, 2020, p. 166), with research suggesting that over half of leaders (54%) only ever implement one style of leadership regardless of the demands of the situation, organisation, or environmental context (Blanchard, 1997, cited in Price-Dowd (2020)). A pragmatic view of self, competencies, and leadership skills may have implications for the development of resilience (Benard, 1991) and multi-level resilience (Visser and Jacobs, 2017) through the consideration that individuals who possess self-efficacy and social awareness may also have the capabilities to develop resilience.

5.2. Resilience, mental health wellbeing and working lives during the pandemic

Asking participants to share their experiences of their working lives during the lockdown periods of the COVID-19 pandemic hoped to identify skills shortages through a process of self-identification. Mental health and wellbeing issues were narrowed further to include appetite changes, altered sleep patterns, increased anxiety, and a lower mood, in addition to the more recognisable issues of stress, depression, and anxiety. 69% of respondents stated they had experienced a mental health wellbeing issue, which reflected the findings of research discussed earlier in this paper and within the literature review (Mental Health Foundation, 2021). 66% of respondents reported that the mental health or wellbeing issue had impacted aspects

of their working lives, such as their ability to work, their ability to support colleagues and/or employees, their concentration, and their motivation. Participants had stories of optimism to share with SME3 and SME4, who both reported positive stories that included references to “looking for the positives” and “resilience helps me”. There was also an acknowledgement that, with or without the presence of a pandemic “Running your own business is immensely stressful, and it’s not easy to apportion responsibility for diminished wellbeing to just COVID-19.”

Some of the positive responses returned to this question suggest the presence of resilience in some of the participants and will be discussed further in Section 5.3 that follows. These findings have significance for considering the training needs of the SME leader. It is not suggested that training or development can prevent mental illness or ill-health, but rather that development opportunities may exist that are able to incorporate elements of well-being and self-care activities that reduce stress and promote mental health wellbeing and resilience. Furthermore, as discussed in the research presented by Cinar (2021), a staged approach to developing personal competencies, crucial to the development of resilient and agile leadership, suggests that offering multiple development opportunities may be beneficial. These findings support the work of Cinar and Bilodeau leaders, who found that sustainable, tailored learning and development can be viewed as effective in meeting the needs of leading in uncertain times.

5.3. Accessing and identifying leadership development and support

A small proportion of participants expressed views, stories, and opinions that suggest the presence of individual resilience, a view shared by G1, who discussed that many SME leaders live with pressure as part of their daily lives and believed that many SME leaders prioritised the needs of the business before their individual needs, recognising the challenge of ensuring that leaders see the benefit of an “investment in themselves to invest in the business.” If resilience is viewed as the ability to bounce back and return to a stable state after disruption (Bhamra et al., 2011), these findings suggest some SME leaders possess individual resilience, which is demonstrated through their responses to daily pressures and challenges. Indicated in these findings is a reluctance to seek support from others, which has implications for the development of organisational resilience and multi-level resilience. SME leaders who choose not to seek support opportunities therefore face greater barriers to establishing the meaningful connections (Cross et al., 2021) that can form the basis of developing a multi-level resilience that is beneficial to the leader, the organisation, and the employees.

Participants were invited to select from a list of courses that would be available to them to support them in developing business resilience. The list provided included: business skills, e.g., digital marketing, data analysis, marketing, diversification, mentoring employees, 1 to 1 mentoring, coaching, group work and support, counselling, stress management, and anger management. When participants were asked to identify support and development opportunities that they may want to access, it was identified that business skills, coaching, and mentoring were most sought after, suggesting that in times of challenge and difficulty, SME leaders prioritise

development opportunities that can offer tangible and wide-spread results, and this was also highlighted through the semi-structured interview discussions. SME6 stated, “What we need is to get access to people who want to get work done” and this was a theme that also emerged from the interviews. Leaders in this sector appear to accept a level of change and challenge that they view as requiring immediate action. The reasons for this focus on “bottom line benefit” (G1) are worthy of further research to gain an insight into the urgency for immediate results and potential links to the high failure rate in start-ups (Office for National Statistics, 2022) in the UK. Further research would provide benefits to support the development of strategies that support sustainability in SMEs.

These findings have implications for the development of multi-level resilience, as the opportunities to build resilience through networking and collaboration may be overlooked and undervalued. Future research should also consider the barriers faced by SME owners in accessing training opportunities.

The key issues emerging from this discussion that contribute to an understanding of “what skills and development do SME (micro and small business) leaders prioritise as necessary to lead effectively in uncertain times” have been discussed. These findings are somewhat limited due to the small sample size; however, the research design has allowed an insight into the views and experiences of 45 small businesses (and two members of business support organisations) who had experienced 12 months of social restrictions and disruption resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, which is of value to further research that considers learning and development within this sector and the impact of resilience.

6. Conclusion

This paper has provided insight into how SME leaders prioritised skills development to provide effective and sustainable leadership in their organisations. The research has shown that leaders were not concerned with accessing services that were designed to increase mental health and wellbeing. Leaders sought self-development with the potential to produce tangible results for the organisation. The discussion of the findings identifies the importance of leaders developing an awareness of self-identity. The research supports the work of Price-Dowd (2020) in recognising that leaders who have a strong and candid understanding of themselves enable them to identify their skillset and therefore identify the gaps that may exist.

Leaders that participated in this research identified mental health and wellbeing issues that may present barriers to their effectiveness as leaders but did not always consider these issues to be significant enough to seek support or intervention. While further research is needed to consider the implications of this finding, it provokes a consideration of how to best support SME leaders to avoid an escalation of these symptoms and to enable leaders to effectively manage the pressures of SME leadership. This finding also suggests the existence of resilience within this sector.

SME leaders in micro and small businesses identified development and support opportunities that offered practical interventions. This supports the findings of Lacerenza et al. (2020), who found that the most effective leadership development opportunities offer practical options underpinned by academic knowledge (through

multiple delivery methods). Therefore, designing training and development opportunities that offer the practical and tangible skills that SME leaders prioritise such as diversification, marketing, analytics, and funding, and incorporating some elements of mental health and wellbeing support, may be a consideration worthy of further exploration and research. Communicating the multi-level benefits of building business resilience to SME leaders may be vital to improving opportunities and outcomes for employees, organisations, and leaders.

Building resilience remains a fuzzy concept. Viewing resilience as a multi-level construct (Visser and Jacobs, 2019) offers benefits when designing and delivering development opportunities. Networking, partnerships, and relationship building promote resilience and may offer a solution to how to embed resilience building into development opportunities that SME leaders value and wish to engage with. Engagement with programmes that provide leaders with the knowledge, skills, and competencies to build business resilience was received positively by the SME leaders who engaged with this research and may offer further opportunities to enhance resilience on an individual level. The ability to respond, and to respond repeatedly, as the wider environment demands, requires what this paper views as ‘sustainable resilience.’

6.1. Managerial and practical implications

The focus of the research has been to explore the impact of SME leaders’ views on the development needs they required 12 months from the beginning of the pandemic. As such, the research outlines the reflective learning that has been undertaken and developed that prepares current or future leaders for any future shock situations. While it is unrealistic, yet not impossible, to expect the same conditions in the future, it is evident that resilience amongst leaders is a significant need, and preparation should and could be enhanced to promote a level of preparedness. Regardless, shocks to the business environment are not uncommon, and as such, this paper outlines developmental areas for consideration following on from shocks, highlighting the importance of resilience development within leaders. Due to the characteristics of micro and small enterprises, it is increasingly imperative for resilience to be central to leadership development, as the impact of shocks can be felt more heavily in these environments. Within micro and small organisations, it is often individuals’ own responsibility to ensure self-development. Therefore, individuals need to recognise their own frailties and develop resilience through their own learning and development.

6.2. Theoretical implications

The research crosses a number of theoretical boundaries in that it transcends the disciplines of leadership, HRD, Small Business and Entrepreneurship, and makes a major contribution to key elements to the development of theory around resilience and leadership and how individuals and firms can prepare for future events and shocks. The paper adds to the literature and knowledge base by identifying the importance of resilience in the small business manager’s toolbox.

6.3. Limitations and future research

The research acknowledges the small-scale nature of the research, which is based on a ‘once in a lifetime’ event and, as such, is not replicable nor is it statistically generalisable. However, Yin (2003) emphasises theoretical generalisability and Tsang (2014) analytical generalisability as key features of small-scale research. Subsequently, key learning is presented and identifies that the development of resilience in leaders is crucial as an area of study and investigation. The learning can be transferred to other uncertain and unexpected situations and crisis events, which allows for further investigation and consideration of leadership development and resilience. This provides scope for the development of areas of research within the field, perhaps broadening the scope of business environment shocks, increased numbers of organisations (and types of organisations), and consideration of a global perspective.

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