

## Reflective Leadership in Crisis

**Dileep Kumar M.**

*Africa Business School, Mohammed VI Polytechnic University, Lot 660, Hay Moulay Rachid, Ben Guerir 43150, Morocco.*

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history

**RECEIVED:** 21-Apr-20

**REVISED:** 09-May-20

**ACCEPTED:** 25-May-20

**PUBLISHED:** 30-Jun-20

#### \*Corresponding Author

Dileep Kumar M.

E-mail:

[dileepkumar.mohanachandran@um6p.ma](mailto:dileepkumar.mohanachandran@um6p.ma)

### ABSTRACT

Business leadership styles are always scrutiny during global epidemic or economic recession days, with due consideration to its applicability and experience. Corporate leaders usually search for new leadership styles to keep the members trust on them as well as business entity. 'Reflective leadership' is one of the cognitive leadership styles, which can be practiced by the corporate leaders during crisis period. An attempt has made to elaborate reflective leadership style in this white paper, which is based on several interviews conducted at senior level corporate leaders. The paper scrutinized the concept 'reflective leadership' to explore the requirements for reflective leadership among corporate leaders. The new generation corporate leaders may look into the requirements of such leadership style and may adopt for organizational agility and business sustenance. The study envisages theoretical implications by advancing the body of knowledge in the area of leadership and organisational behavior.

**Keywords:** *Reflection, leadership, reflective leadership, cognition, behavior.*

### Introduction

Look at the world around. What is happening? Except 'change', we could see, nothing is permanent. Corporate climate had to bow their spine towards severe uncertainties. Culture and belief system have lost its relevance. Ever changing demand from external and internal organizational environment has necessitated the corporate restructuring. Majority business operating models are forced to re-negotiate with 'changing business volatility'. Inevitability of technology acceptance for business suitability and resilience is well learned. Meeting the customer expectations in the crisis period turned to be a phenomenal task to corporate leaders. In this juncture, traditional leadership styles are redundant and corporate leaders started looking for immunity, where there is no leadership vaccine available. Evidently the reflexes of the past have lost its charm. Though it is not a full panacea, to a certain extent during the crisis period corporate leaders may invest some time for 'reflexive leadership'.

### Literature Review

#### *Who are reflective leaders?*

The term was defined by several authors. Some of them consider the reflection as stepping back from the immediate environment and look at the situational factors intuitively. The leader must engage in the process of captivating exchange of thoughts with himself or herself and with other people. He/she must adopt double loop viz., a process of looking at the crisis individually and collectively about perspectives, values, experiences, beliefs and the future, in order to explore a clarity for a change in action.

Reflection has the root in research mindset. It is a cognitive process. During the uncertainties he/she experiences several complexities, mental difficulties, discomforts, and state of distrust. The leaders will be feeling an acute disappointment with the radical departure from ever loving,

experienced based decision-making process and look at the possibilities for examining, expounding and finding the most preferable ways of handling crisis and eliminates uncertainties. Henceforth, we need to understand that reflection is a mental process has its root from a problem or complicated situation, that necessities critical thinking and analytical abilities. While some other scholars believed that reflection is closely related to action and personal experience. The reflective practitioner engages in thinking along with the effect of action. There are two types of reflection here. Reflection 'in action' and reflection 'on action'.

Reflection 'in action' is conscious thinking and amendments while on the job. While, reflection 'on action' is the reflection done after experiencing the action. The leaders search the element of achievement based on the judgement he/she has made. A reflective conversation has its association with on-the-spot surfacing, criticizing, restructuring, and testing of intuitive understanding of experienced phenomena. Being aware of one's rational is vital to contribute up-to-date and reasonable decisions, while working with other members. An important aspect a leader consciously touch in reflective thinking is touching the feelings, thoughts and behaviors of other people in the management as well as accomplishment of change objectives.

*Reflective thinking is thus an essential need of corporate leaders during uncertainties and crisis. A need of empathetic observations and reflections on one's own 'understanding for a change' as well as the "external change imperatives" are must in reflective leadership.*

Reflective thinking is not only an internal process but an external one promoting improved critical thinking skills together with self-understanding as an essential way of inner work, which emerges in the energy for employing in outer work. This type of thinking is required for understanding what it means to be significant for oneself and in one's organization or practice. An attitude towards object-oriented learning (ORL) is the perfect environment for reflective thinking. Biases, preconceived notions and subjective evaluations of the experience, will be reflectively evaluated by a reflective leader exploring all 'imperfections to achieve perfections' in crisis. Here the leader exhibits the competence to disrupt by dwelling out existing knowledge through 'the questioning of assumptions and perceptions' to make room for new insights.

## Methodology

This particular paper followed qualitative research method narratives integrated into the form of a white paper. Narrative is one of many qualitative methodologies that can

be taken into consideration to bearing mind the collection and analysis of information and reporting observations. The model analysed varied leadership models available in the current management literature and analysed its suitability in crisis management time. It is evaluated that such traditional leadership models are to be augmented with reflective thinking and reflective leadership traits. The paper tried to explore the leadership factors which are closely knit with the crisis management period, instigating the importance of 'reflections' among the business leaders and its requirement in handling the change management.

## Discussion

### ***Reflective leadership requirements: Speed and precision***

The fourth Industrial Revolution may have less welcome consequences with the social, political, cultural, and economic upheavals (Nakayama, 2019). With the advent of any uncertainty impact or inevitable change, a reflective leader should look at "what matters most and make decisions with confidence". During the crisis stage when the leader exposes the crisis condition for external and external reflections, there will be the likelihood for priorities, clashes and emotional burst, which will compel to work with anxieties overflow. Focusing on few things should be the priority here, since it supports in bringing back business to a sustainable operational track. Rapid 'decisions on few things can bring back the tranquility to business rather attending all issues.

### ***Enhancing Resilience***

Resilience in addressing those challenges which brings rapid recovery, is the resultant manifestation of reflective leadership. Constant engagement to explore the vulnerabilities, critically look at with all possibilities and engage them into trial and error exercises for best possible alternatives can bring back the organization toward recovery. A shared understanding, reflections, rapid adaptation of negative feedbacks and development of a mental frame to accept all impossibilities and possibilities integrated with critical reflections, should be the interest of a reflective leader which can absorb setbacks and recuperate quickly.

### ***Coupling and Decoupling***

The most important reflection leaders must engage in the crisis is coupling the crisis factors and critically reflect the

potentials for decoupling. Major concern of any leader is 'business life sustenance'. The reflective leaders should engage in coupling process by the selection of factors that will not work anymore and isolating those factors for gradual parting. An understanding on the resources, competencies and current operating models which facilitate the reflective leader to engage in coupling. Leader should decouple certain factors carefully, which are mutually interdependent. Such segregation can bring very focused and effective decisions during crisis and change. The reflective decision is 'which systems should be switched off' and 'which ones should be put on life support'.

### ***Delve deeper***

Reflection and learning will go together in the journey of experience. A deep reflection on the existing process and operating models, which are misfit into the current, changing circumstances can bring cognitive challenges. Through collective consciousness and dwell deep, reflective leaders can transform the way of thinking as well as perspectives by extending intellectual experiences. Questions like, "why that way? Can I look at the scenario in a different way? Would it be relevant in the changing context? How can I improve further? Can I bring reflective practices for better decision making. Such way of looking at business scenarios not only brings changes in the individual belief system but also to the team members.

### ***Sense making***

Reflective practices bring sense making among the team and individuals. Looking at the pros and cons of strategic and operational decisions, with its potential contributions at the time of crisis, is a reflective leadership process. A learning with collective involvement, shapes not only 'what we think', but also 'how we interpret what we think', in a sense making leadership effort. Effective sense making needs a well prepared method and process to integrate all available information from varied sources, share it with the right members and reflect and deliberate their feedback, generate a lively depiction that everybody comprehends, evaluate possible 'futures' and probable consequences, and formulate specific decisions, that to be met individually or collectively.

### ***Lead authoritatively***

The most important aspect during a crisis is identifying a reflective leader who can authoritatively develop

pathways to cross the crisis. A reflective leader should be great learner. There is no short cut in gaining awareness and the ever-valued learning experiences. How many times, with his/her past experiences, they have led the crisis situations individually or collectively, that matters in every future crisis where they will be taking the lead. If the leader does not have this capability, then the platforms of should open to any second level reflective leader or it should be done through 'collective reflections'. Authoritative leadership is the byproduct of reflective engagements in the past and successful deliveries. A reflective leader applies individual and collective reflective means to capture the end.

### ***Calm within the storm***

A proactive reflection on consequences of burn out during crisis would be a greater idea to identify better coping mechanism. Gathering all facts related to the crisis and looking at the consequences of all those parameters need, 'emotional maturity coupled with reflective thinking'. Reactive behavior is immediate and with little-to-no conscious thought, which can bring several failures. In a swiftly emerging condition, leaders need to stay abreast with the changing information, so that they can make use of their reflections properly on each scenario, segment by segment thorough sound analysis, with coupling and decoupling mechanisms to arrive at appropriate decisions. Having greater rationale and emotional clarity about pre, during and post crisis scenarios helps to lower reactivity to the stimulus causing the emotion. Controlling emotional reactions need rationale reflective leadership.

### ***Permissive reflections and consensus***

Many leaders fail during global crisis period due to their lack willingness towards 'permissive consensus'. The policies and decision followed by the organization with his/her leadership, will no longer valid in the turbulent global crisis situations. Still the leaders cling to their positional power and prefer to continue the same policies without giving permissive consent to the second line of organization, an opportunity for 'permissive reflections' to arrive at permissive consensus to carry forward the organization with fidelity and accuracy. The logic behind the 'permissive consensus' will be to facilitate reflective thinking which alter the misfit policies and facilitate collective intelligence for business agility and organizational survival.

### ***Reflect to frame the crisis***

Continuous gathering of information critical reflection on them is inevitable during the crisis period for action and performance. It's not gathering so many information's from every source. Progressive gathering of information and continuous and progressive reflections are important for effective framing of crisis for interventions. Leaders should continuously examine the crisis and classify it down to the minutes, hours, and weeks for critical reflection and intime decision making. Revisiting the original plans and making changes in the existing one, if inevitable, need to be entertained. Reflections make the leaders stay focused and take timely decision to control progressive levels of crisis.

### ***Knowing-doing gap***

From varied sources a leader will be getting several information. Knowing the crisis factors will not bring solution to the crisis. A reflective leader should fill the gap between knowing and doing. The gaps linked to resources or competencies or need of innovation etc. need to be timely reflected for fulfilling the organizational capability. Getting knowledge from all possible source of information is not the matter. With that critical information, how his/her reflections can bring proper assets, which can assist in bringing the derailed operations into an agile one, matters. Leaders must use plans, analysis, meetings, and presentations to inspire deeds, not as substitutes for action. From knowing to doing, (action phase), reflection and critical reflections on the structure, process, people and resources are to be made. (knowledge is only valuable when it is enacted).

### ***Expect the unexpected***

Every leader should have the capability to handle unexpected crisis situations. Especially in a volatile business environment, ups and downs are quite common. It is quite natural, under extreme pressure, that leaders lose the confidence on his/her experience in handling crisis, leading to unpredictability of a critical event. Proactive leadership measures are in need to set out situations where any crisis situations can be effectively managed. When the organizations are smoothly running, leaders' reflective capabilities should be utilized to develop proactive measures in handling unexpected situation. A reflective leader always looks at the 'possibilities' of how to deal with the crisis individually or collectively, rather just gathering all sources of facts and get panic in handling those

situations, without reflections. When people and process go differently during crisis period, critical reflections can bring normalcy. Emotional intelligence does matters.

### ***Drive toward actionable intelligence***

Criticality of any 'leader contribution' depends on how much complex and sensitive the data he or she is going to handle in a crisis. Critical reflections can navigate the confusing data properly through intelligence. Since the sources of information can derail any futuristic decisions, the leaders should make use of critical reflections, in order to ensure the authenticity and clarity of the data. Using the intelligence pyramid, the data gathered should be segregated into potential, strategic, tactical, and operational intelligence and compared to data collected from other sources. The information obtained from consultants, prior to the crisis period and during the crisis period should be equally reflected and deliberated, either individually or collectively, assessing the proportion of risk accompanying with business lose or survival.

### ***Accountable decision architecture***

Suitable governance is vital in balancing a firm's ability to regulate the outcomes with its capacity to invent and respond to varying crisis situations. An unbending governance structure, with less elasticity in all decisions flowing up, may block effective decision making and prevents organizations from evolving. Leaders should realize that the comfort given to the system during good old days cannot be sustained during crisis period and they should critically reflect the structural change which can bring solutions to organizational capabilities. Ambidexterity and holarctic options reflectively should be investigated for change management initiatives. This makes sense where organizational design is thoroughly aligned to organizational outcomes. Decision logic and delegations should be substantiated through reflective thinking.

### ***Network of teams***

One of the important aspects during crisis handling situation is leader's strong belief towards collective intelligence, where team members share the responsibilities and deliberate and reflect critically on crisis scenarios in their lead towards collective deliverables. A reflective leader should facilitate development of network organizations where the team members can control the information flow as well as ownership. After developing the

teams, a reflective leader must move toward guaranteeing multidirectional communication, where the flow of information happens vertical, horizontal and across the functional teams. Reflective leaders should develop a central hub to back the teams for daily stand-up meetings and ensure that they are using first-order problem-solving principles. Team reflections can facilitate collective intelligence and it will provide authentic information to the leaders to have reflective decision-making during crisis.

### ***Make smart trade-offs***

When faced with crisis, leaders must be able to identify where 'tradeoffs' take place and choose how to deal with them. Initial investigation of tradeoffs is needed to make the organization capable enough to handle the crisis decisions that reflect priorities between requirements. Reflective thinking on available options and selection of best alternative need to be made for organizational survival. Here the policies which have pampered during good old days need to be critically reflected for its possible continuity, during crisis time. Care should be taken that when a leader touches the 'comfort zone' of existing staff, it will impinge on the motivation. Most important aspect here during crisis period, is not to have a 'competing business model' rather the 'operating model' which meets the 'change requirements'. Reflections are essential to priorities the selection and implementation of business models, where tradeoff smartly to be priority.

### ***Visible impact***

Any change decision during crisis period should invite thorough reflections, since the decisions and its implications have clear impact on all the stake holders. The employees lose the trust on management and it can damage the regular functional and cross functional flow of work. Outside the organization, such scenario reflects the stakeholders lack of confidence on the organization. Reflection should be more than 'intellectual thinking' since it is intermingled with practitioners' feelings and emotions and acknowledges an inter-relationship with 'action and consequences. Every decision a leader takes during crisis should get proper support from the operating level and the pros and cons should be discussed thoroughly and ensue collective consensus, wherever possible. What people is 'seeing' is more important in market. Hence, the visibility of critical reflections of the leaders and action orientations of members are to be visible and well scrutinized for its accountability among the stake holders.

### ***Redefining risk and uncertainty***

A standard risk analysis procedure will be one of the choices among the leaders to make alternate actions. However, how far such risk analysis procedures support them during the crisis is unpredictable. The possible outcome of standard risk analysis procedures needs to be subjected to reflective thinking, at individual or team level that identify change dimensions which are inevitable in managing the crisis. Ensuring commitment to a course of action, together with commitment to manage its (unknown) consequences, need the facilitation from leader's side to the members. Risk rating analysis need to be done on each process flow with the team members, which reflect group understanding, deliberations and critical thinking. Managing uncertainty during crisis period thus require redefining the critical success factor as well as the risk. Reflective leadership is a must.

### ***Reflective learning***

Deep reflective learning is a critical component in the organizational learning process. The act of reflecting-on-action enables the members to spend time exploring why the company has taken a decision on certain parameters, 'how the members acted on it, what was happening after its implementation and so on'. Before the action and after the action leaders should facilitate critical reflections of the members who were part of its planning and implementation. The intention behind reflective learning is to promote learner interdependence or collaboration between members in their action where the dialogues between them, and between them and leaders involve double loop learning. It facilitates in the future level team autonomy and team independence in handling the change process. Hence, a leader should facilitate 'reflective learning culture' as well as he/she has the ability for reflective learning.

### ***Paternalistic sense***

Success of any leader depends on how far they make use of reflections in understanding the need of the subordinates. A reflective interaction and understanding between leaders and subordinates will develop strong leader follower relationship and leader member exchanges. A leader's reflective style can contribute to members innovative behavior, and it will intern contributes to organizational performance. Culture of innovation is the output of a paternalistic sense. Since staying competitive in the market requires members innovative behavior, especially

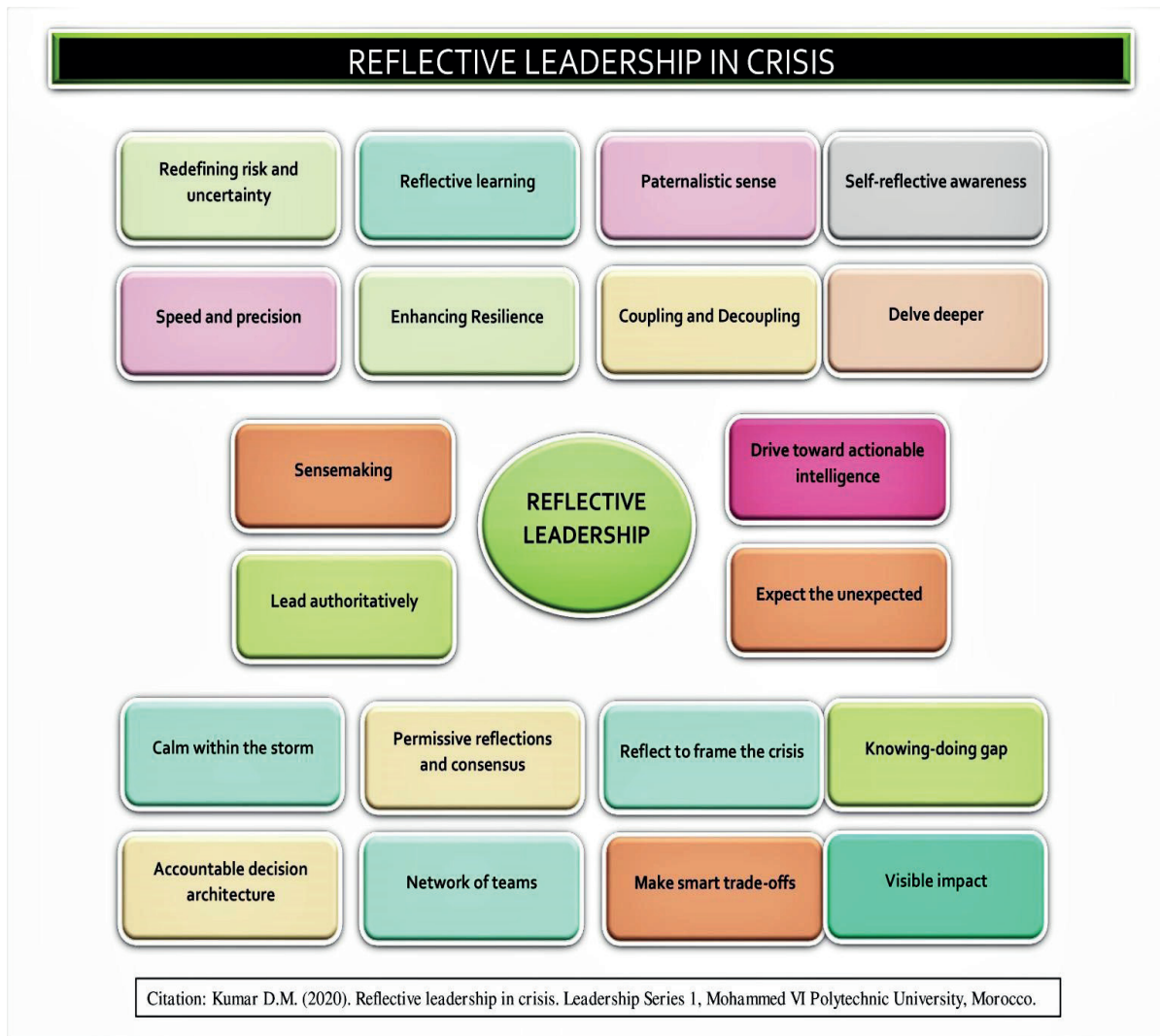
during crisis period, leader’s reflective appreciation and behavior towards subordinates can ensure their sustained contribution to the work. A parent should not create fear of change among the subordinates. The crisis period is more multifaceted, where information needs to be accessible to all the members in the changing business environment, which prompt the members to constantly rethink, switch directions, and constantly engage in development of continuous problem-solving strategies.

**Self-reflective awareness**

Self-reflective awareness is a ‘meta-cognitive’ ability, indicates that it includes thinking about and reflecting on one’s own ‘mental progressions’. The leader should

reflect his/her self-reflective awareness, when they are aware of own feelings and thoughts about them. Being aware of own feelings, its weaknesses and strength can control the emotions and facilitate better interaction between a leader and the subordinates. Crisis period require more emotional control and emotional maturity. Loose talks with lack of emotional control can create loss of trust and confidence among the subordinate members. All unpleasant decisions should be communicated to them in an emotionally matured way. Making members heartfully accept the change decisions with cent percent consensus is the success of leader’s self-reflective awareness, viz., thoughtful awareness of those feelings, which is the resultant manifestation of critical reflections of leaders positive and negative, own emotional discharges.

**Reflective Leadership Model**



## Implications

The study extends theoretical implications by facilitating the advancement of the body of knowledge in the area of leadership and organisational behavior. A change in the traditional leadership styles followed by the top management is envisaged, by considering reflective leadership features. Some of the crisis like COVID19 impact or any unexpected change in the business invites the leaders of the organisation to rethink the existing business and operating models to handle the crisis with fidelity and care. Leaders should experiment Reflective Leadership Model, as a new crisis intervention leadership model, which can ensure effective organisational change and transformation.

## Conclusion

The implication of this white paper is to broaden the repertoire of leadership management practice and theory rests in accepting the scope and array of concepts, their comparisons, variations and applicability. There is a need to look at varying models of corporate leadership, theories of leadership, especially during unexpected crisis events, which affect the current operating business practices and decision-making leadership styles. Trust, empathy, and reflections are the most important cognitive traits that leaders should consider getting the followers continuous support. Practicing continuous reflection during crisis period can bring better learning environment, that brings organizational agility and business sustenance.

## Competing Interest Statement

All authors have read and approved the manuscript and take full responsibility for its contents. The authors have declared that no competing interest exists.

## Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the reviewers and editors of this manuscript.

## References

- Dunoon, D. (2002). Rethinking leadership for the public sector, *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, 61(3), 3–18.
- Fulmer, R. M., Gibbs, P.A., & Goldsmith, M. (2000). Developing leaders: how winning companies keep on winning. *Sloan Management Review*, 42(1), 49–59.
- Kouzes, J., & Posner, B. (2012). *The leadership challenges*. 5th edn. Wiley, New York.
- Margaret E.S. (2008). On becoming a critically reflective practitioner. *Health Information and Libraries Journal* 25, 229–232.
- McKay, E.A. (2008). *Reflective practice: doing, being and becoming a reflective practitioner. Skills for Practice in Occupational Therapy*. Oxford: Elsevier Ltd.
- Nakayama, O. (2019). Fourth Industrial Revolution, Society 5.0, strengths as human beings, moral education, *Horizon Journal of Humanities & Social Science Research*. 1(1), 11–12. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37534/bp.jhssr.2019.v1.n1.id1016.p11>
- Richard, J. (2011). Reframing the concept reflection: Consciousness, Experiential learning and reflective learning practices. *American Association for Adult and Continuing Education*. 61(2) 181–197.
- Rodgers, C. (2002). Defining reflection: Another look at John Dewey and reflective thinking. *Teachers College Record*, 104(4), 842–866.
- Scheffer, A., Braun, N., & Scheffer, M. (2012). *Hanging the mirror: The discipline of reflective leadership*. Shelbyville, KY: Wasteland Press.
- Stoeckel, P.R., & Davies, T.G. (2007). Reflective leadership by selected community college presidents. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 31(11), 895–912.
- Werhane, P.H. (2008). Mental models, moral imagination and system thinking in the age of globalization. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 78(3), 463–474.
- Citation:** Kumar, D.M. (2020). Reflective Leadership in Crisis. *Horizon J. Hum. Soc. Sci. Res.*, 2(1). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37534/bp.jhssr.2020.v2.n1.id1043.p11>

## Biographical Statement of Author

**Dileep Kumar M** is a Professor of Research and Strategy of Africa Business School, Mohammed VI Polytechnic University, Morocco. With double doctorate in Behavioural Sciences and Business Administration, he has engaged in the academic clusters of Entrepreneurship, Leadership and Management. He is a consultant of research and project management for several manufacturing and service organisations.



He has written several industrial case studies and published several research papers in reputed journals. Several books, and monographs in the area of Entrepreneurship, Leadership and Management, is also in his credentials. Having the professional expertise of more than 18 years' in institution building, teaching, training, research and

consultancy, he has contributed substantively to academic and corporate services.

His teaching interests are organizational behavior, leadership, competency mapping and profiling, change management, entrepreneurship, consumer behavior, strategic management, research methodology and quantitative research.

His research expertise lies in organizational behavior, human resource management, entrepreneurship, consumer behavior, and strategic management.

### **Professor Dr. Dileep Kumar M.**

Africa Business School  
Mohamed VI Polytechnic University  
Lot 660, Hay Moulay Rachid, Ben Guerir 43150  
Morocco

**E-mail:** [prof.dr.dil@gmail.com](mailto:prof.dr.dil@gmail.com)