**Pedagogical Leadership in a Period of Uncertainty: Management Perspectives on the Shift to Distance Learning in a Religious College as a Case Study**

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**Abstract**

In a period of uncertainty resulting from a crisis, heads of academic institutions and school principals have to deal with changes in the ways teachers teach and students learn, and pedagogy must be adapted to new constraints and possibilities. In many cases, the principals of schools, the pedagogical leaders at the top of the school hierarchy who are responsible for organizational change, must direct the pedagogical changes without any guidance or directions from some professional or authoritative body. This article will address the need for redesigning the “principal’s desk” in a pedagogical crisis to assure the school’s functioning and the continuation of learning at a high level during a crisis that is characterized by uncertainty. Among the tools on the new (in a period of uncertainty) “principal’s desk” that will be discussed in this article are “agility,” i.e. the combination of the principal’s accessibility to the various lower levels of the organization with flexibility and adaptability. Another is “adaptive leadership,” which requires changing the familiar practices and procedures and increasing teachers’ autonomy, as it is they who have direct and daily contact with the students and can see the needs as they arise. In doing so, the teachers can contribute to the collective organizational wisdom. In a period of uncertainty, the teachers are the change leaders with regard to everything that has to do with identifying student needs and adjusting to meet them (both with regard to pedagogy and learning styles). The principals and administrators, as agents of pedagogical change, are called upon, as agile pedagogical leaders, to bring about the needed changes from the position of enablers while empowering the teachers to adjust their teaching to their learning groups.

The management theory described in this article is presented by way of a case study, using a qualitative approach to examine the managerial leadership of the shift to distance learning and the administration’s conduct (guidelines, requirements, and modes of operation) as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic in a religious-Haredi college from the perspective of the college’s lecturers. This case study will allow us to draw conclusions regarding recommendations for pedagogical leadership in a period of uncertainty.

*Keywords*: adaptable leadership, pedagogical leaders, school principals, pedagogy during a crisis, principal’s desk, learning and teaching processes, leading educational change.

**Pedagogical Leadership in a Period of Uncertainty**

In recent years, the training of school principals, particularly in Israel, has focused on two areas. The first is that school principals must exhibit pedagogical leadership, meaning that he or she is at the top of the pedagogical hierarchy of the school not only in ensuring student achievement and high-quality learning results (Male & Palaiolugou, 2012), but also – and especially – in creating an environment for the teachers that makes it possible for them to improve their teaching (Forssten Seiser, 2020). Bozo-Schwartz and Mendel-Levi (2016) describe pedagogical leadership as the responsibility of the school principal for engendering and improving practices of teaching and learning.

The processes by which teaching can be improved through strengthening the professional training of teachers are complex and require expertise. The policy that has the most influence on improving student achievement is that of creating opportunities for teachers’ learning and professional development, in both formal and informal settings, with the principal’s participation as both a learner and as a leader. Consequently, the leadership role of the school principal is to strengthen and deepen the skills and knowledge of the school’s staff and to create a school culture of collaboration in both knowledge and praxis (Bozo-Schwartz and Mendel-Levy, 2016, p. 4).

The second focus of the training of principals has been the development of the capacity for directing change as a necessary and central skill for a school principal (Shahaf, et al., 2011). The practicum element in the training of school principals in Israel is dedicated, at least in principle, to the candidates’ gaining experience at leading school change. School change is regarded as the responsibility of the school administrators and the principals’ training involves leading pedagogical processes in a school as a means of acquiring experience at leading change before becoming a school principal. These two focal points of principal training reveal the mainstream understanding of pedagogical leadership as the skills to lead school change.

All of this applies to a normal state of affairs and to the training of school principals in a reality that is largely predictable, despite ongoing reforms in educational policy. However, in our present reality since the beginning of 2020, with the spread of Covid-19 and the shift to synchronous and asynchronous online learning, school principals have had to exhibit educational leadership without any training or structured guidance from some professional body possessing both authority and responsibility.

In this reality, the concepts of changing pedagogy in a period of uncertainty, adaptability, leading change, and pedagogical leadership all combine into both the direct and indirect coping with the change to teaching and learning online.

In this article, we will discuss these topics and concepts and their appropriateness to a period of crisis and uncertainty, along with the changes needed to make them fit better. The results of the research and discussion can serve as an outline for school leadership in a period of uncertainty.

# Uncertainty

Events that cause worldwide, border-crossing uncertainty like the present Covid-19 crisis, which occur with greater and greater frequency in a world that depends upon advanced technology and mobility, also present challenges to teaching and teaching methods that make it necessary for educators to make use of new forms of pedagogy (Kidman & Chang, 2020). This is the case with regard to teachers but what about the role of school principals?

The assumption is that school principals are the pedagogical leaders in charge of quality control of teaching and learning, cultivating new educational methods and technologies, etc. They are responsible for instituting the changes needed as a response to a crisis. A period of uncertainty or operating during a period of uncertainty is called in the research literature VUCA, standing for **V**olatility, **U**ncertainty, **C**omplexity, and **A**mbiguity (Mink, Esterhuysen, Mink & Owen, 1993, p. 54-55).

Relating to this situation and perhaps also operating under conditions of uncertainty is called VUCA prime (Johnson, 2009), an expression meant to represent a systematic approach to addressing the leadership problems in a chaotic situation such as one described by VUCA. In such a situation one needs to operate according to the parallel principles: **V**ision, **U**nderstanding, **C**larity, and **A**gility.

In this article, we will focus on two concepts, volatility, and agility as a response to it, in order to say something general about pedagogy during a crisis. When pedagogy is exposed to volatility, those who are responsible (school principals) need agility – to be accessible and flexible. With respect to accessibility, we can say that school principals need to set aside time and resources for empathy, reflection, planning, mentoring, and implementation especially in times of crisis. However, who needs to be flexible? Is it the teachers, who bear the responsibility of teaching, which requires them to plan lessons and develop pedagogical tools, or is it the school leadership who are asked to exhibit flexibility in that they suggest different approaches to the teachers who can then choose from a “bank” of possibilities whatever is appropriate to their classroom of learning group?

Like in management in general, it is of great importance in school administration that it be clearly defined who has the authority and responsibility to carry out the different tasks of the organization. For this reason, the answer to the question of who needs to exhibit flexibility under conditions of uncertainty should not be that it is everyone, both teachers and administrators.

# Facilitating Change

Wagner (2001) presents four basic conditions for educational leaders facilitating change in schools with respect to teachers: joint vision, relationships of respect and trust, the establishment of an environment of commitment and engagement, and, of course, recognition of the need for change.

Wagner emphasizes the conditions for facilitating change in a school. Concerning the tactics for instituting change, Weil & Karmon (2015) presented a study to the Israeli institute for training school principals, “Avney Rosha ,” titled “Patterns of action of principals who instituted a significant pedagogic change.” In the study, they divide what they call “patterns of action” into “foci of action” and “modes of action.” Besides the conditions for change and the tactics for carrying it out, it is important to determine who the change is meant for, who will carry it out, and who is responsible for leading it. Every member of the organization must know and understand his or her specific role with respect to the planned change. In this way, the wheels of change can roll forward to a goal in an effective and well-defined way. In the proposal below, I will examine anew the question of change-facilitation under circumstances of uncertainty.

Every school, or, more generally, every organizational culture, should be evaluated on its own terms in terms of its practices, agenda, and the interpersonal relations of the people who work in it. However, in a period of crisis, an organizational culture and all of its components take on new meaning – a new culture is formed in response to the changing situation. It is clear that new opportunities for constructive organizational change in terms of “what” questions, “how” questions, and “where” questions arise in a crisis (Zhao, 2020). Changes going on outside the organization influence internal changes to an organizational culture. This fact naturally leads to the need for a different kind of management in a period of uncertainty.

# A Different Kind of Management for a Period of Uncertainty

In this article, I propose that in a period of pedagogical crisis, school principals should show pedagogical leadership by facilitating change that is characterized by granting more autonomy to teachers in their classrooms.

As we saw above, agility is of great importance in a period of crisis. This term originally referred to the physical capacity to rapidly move one’s body while changing direction or speed in response to some stimulus (Sheppard & Young, 2006, p. 919). In the context of management, it has come to refer to a management style that treats the organization as an entity whose existence and operation are responsive to stimuli coming from its environment. The roles of teachers and principals change, sometimes radically, during a pedagogical crisis. Teachers are called upon to show initiative, to be creative, to adjust, and to change their pedagogy. Principals need to facilitate this by providing the infrastructure and by organizing the school’s operation in a way appropriate to the changes conceived of and instituted by the teachers. The agility of principals is expressed through their accessibility to their staff and their flexibility about changing modes of operation at the teachers’ requests and suggestions.

To put it concisely, during a pedagogical crisis, school principals, as agile pedagogical leaders, are called upon to act as enablers of change. It is the teachers who need to be empowered to both conceive of and implement the style of teaching that is appropriate to their class; the principals ought to be “agents of pedagogical change” per their role as enablers.

# The Principal’s Desk – A New Definition

The topic of how the principal organizes and administers his or her school and the tools at his or her disposal during a period of uncertainty can now be seen from a new and interesting perspective. Under normal conditions, the principal’s desk can be characterized using the principles of the Johari Window model (Luft & Ingham, 1955). The four windows map the possibilities of matters known to oneself and known to others. The ‘open’ quadrant represents those matters relevant to the organization known to both the subject and to others; the ‘unknown’ quadrant represents those matters not known either to the subject or to others; the ‘blind spot’ quadrant represents those matters not known to the subject but known to others; the ‘hidden’ quadrant represents matters known to the subject but not to others.

The operating principle for using this model is that the ‘open’ must break its boundaries in the directions of the ‘hidden and the ‘blind spot.’ However, under conditions of uncertainty, the ‘open’ quadrant is almost nonexistent. The ‘unknown’ quadrant is much greater and more significant in key matters; moreover, concerning those matters that can be classified as belonging to the principal’s ‘blind spot,’ the principal is at a disadvantage compared to the other members of the staff.

A principal’s desk which is dominated by his or her ‘unknown’ and ‘blind spot’ and weak in matters belonging to the ‘open,’ especially when combined with him or her being physically distant from the teachers, reveals the need to restructure. In a period of uncertainty, the teachers are better positioned to shed light on the ‘blind spot’ and to initiate the actions that would lessen the ‘unknown.’ The teachers are more sensitive to the demands being made upon the students (and on themselves) and thus are more able to preserve quality, continuous learning. For these reasons, it is the teachers who will most likely be the source for the ways for the organization to operate at its best. During periods of uncertainty, Johari windows should be discussed from the perspectives of the teachers and not that of the principal!

In short, during a crisis of uncertainty, the principal’s desk changes from being the source of initiative and guidance for an educational institution into a round table that invites ideas and initiatives from the teachers.

These reflections about the principal’s desk during a crisis under conditions of uncertainty, as reflected in the central insight of this article that the principal is an enabler of change for the teachers who are responsible for the changes, invite the conclusion that the principal’s desk cannot stay the same. It must become larger, more open, attentive, available, and flexible to make room for all the initiatives and practices that the teachers have produced while teaching. There is no point in allocating resources and energy to revealing areas that belong to the ‘hidden’ or ‘blind spot’ quadrants. Rather, the principal must create a pedagogical “table” that empowers and enables, that can include others and introduce everyone to the new ideas and teaching practices that the teaching staff has generated.

# Adaptive Leadership

Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky from the Harvard Kennedy School coined the term “adaptive leadership” inspired by the biological sciences which describe how an organism is required to adapt in order to survive and procreate (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002). They applied the biological concept of adaptation to the realm of people and organizations. This capacity becomes even more important during a period of crisis.

Relating to change leadership in the context of adaptive leadership (which is necessary during periods of uncertainty), Heifetz and Luria (2000)[[1]](#footnote-1) direct our attention to the employees and staff members, rather than the managers, as the core change leaders:

In order to generate change, the managers must transform the patterns of behavior that have been inculcated in them… The solutions to the adaptive challenges will not be found in boardrooms but in the collective wisdom of the employees at every level (Heifetz & Luria, 2000, p. 150).

Heifetz and Linsky demonstrate the practice of adaptive leadership using the metaphors of “standing on the balcony” and “going down to the dance floor.” Standing on the balcony represents a leader observing and evaluating some situation from a high and broad point of view. Intervention and implementation take place on “the dance floor.” Heifetz and Linsky point out another thing that is characteristic of adaptive leadership: when an organization is stable and balanced, it will be necessary to generate discomfort in order to facilitate change. During a crisis, in contrast, the manager’s role is to generate an atmosphere of calm in the organizational culture so that the organization’s work can be accomplished. The movement of the manager between the balcony and the dance floor is what makes generating, revealing, and implementing the change possible. Heifetz and Linsky claim that going out on the balcony during a crisis is a luxury[[2]](#footnote-2) and the manager must spend more time on the dance floor to ensure the functioning of the organization (Heifetz & Luria, 2000).

Adaptive leadership is expressed in practice in educational management during a crisis. At such a time, it a necessity and not just a preferred style of management. The manager or school principal, as the leader of his or her organization, must adapt to changing circumstances that are themselves not entirely clear and make the practical decisions needed for the organization to function. The analog to the dance floor in a school setting is the day-to-day regular functioning of the school. According to the theory of adaptive leadership, the principal/manager in a crisis should place himself mostly on the dance floor – i.e. be involved with the business of running the school – and should spend less time on the balcony, working on his or her vision, new initiatives and maintaining a broad perspective.

My proposal is that it is important for specifically the teachers to go up to the balcony during these periods, to take the initiative, to think “outside of the box” about new practices that are appropriate to the circumstances. These new practices can then be passed to the principal on the dance floor who can check if they are practical, adjust them as needed, and ensure that the teachers’ ideas are realized.

Another principle of adaptive leadership that is of particular significance during a crisis is the principle that any member of the organization can be a leader from wherever he or she is on the organizational chart. The manager/principal is not the only leader, especially considering that during a crisis he will mostly be found on the dance floor. In other words, from the perspective of adaptive leadership during a crisis, it is the action that is the focus and not the person (even if he is officially the manager of the organization) and thus leadership is not limited to management alone.

Every teacher is an initiator; every teacher knows when and how to bring about the necessary changes and every principal is the coordinator and enabler of these changes on the dance floor.

Appropriate adaptiveness by a leader, the movement between the balcony and the dance floor, and distributed leadership are all principles drawn from the theory of adaptive leadership. In applying these principles to the behavior of school principals during a period of uncertainty, one can say that the principal is called upon to adapt to a new reality wherein he needs to spend most of his time on the dance floor, in the thick of the educational “action” (rather than to be preoccupied with vision and general policy). The innovation here is that it is the teachers who lead the changes and the principal who is called upon to manage the dance floor and enable the teachers to take the initiative.

This study aims to examine the thesis of adaptive leadership as principals/managers who enable and staff who initiate and implement in a period of uncertainty: its characteristics, the need for it, and the extent of its efficiency. Accordingly, the chosen field research takes the form of a study of the shift to distance teaching at a college with religious-Haredi characteristics, where the transition was significant and required appropriate action on the part of the leadership.

# Effective Teaching in Distance Learning

“Distance learning” is characterized by the activities of teaching and learning taking place at separate locations, with the teacher-student interaction mediated through a printed or electronic medium of some sort that helps bridge the gaps in time and distance. Although at its outset, distance teaching and learning were asynchronous, the development of the Internet has produced the option of synchronous distance learning (Simonson et al., 2019; Bozkurt, 2019).

Under the TPACK (**T**echnology, **P**edagogy, and **C**ontent **K**nowledge) model, the teacher’s proficiency in the field of knowledge and the content of the course constitute only one side of a triangle that ensures the success of distance teaching (Mishra & Koehler, 2006). The second side is “digital proficiency,” which includes, among other factors, the teacher’s mastery of various aspects of technology (Janssen et al., 2013). The third side is the ability to reformulate teaching methods in a manner that has value-added benefits for distance teaching while preserving high pedagogical standards, effective learning, and the learning experience (Shonfeld & Magen-Nagar, 2019).

Optimal implementation of distance learning requires training teachers not only not only for orientation in and mastery of digital tools and the technological skills needed to operate them, but also for familiarity with the forms of pedagogy suited to these tools and their practical use. The aim is both to ensure that the level and effectiveness of the teaching-learning process and the learning outcomes and experiences are maintained, and to provide value-added benefits that do not exist in traditional teaching (Shonfeld & Magen-Nagar, 2019; Shenhav & Geffon, 2021). In terms of the SMAR model (Puentedura, 2006, cited in Hamilton et al., 2016), which describes four levels of technology use for teaching purposes, it is not enough to use a new technology as a direct substitute for traditional teaching without a functional change in pedagogy (**S**ubstitution). Nor is it enough to introduce specific improvements in pedagogy (**A**ugmentation). Rather, it is necessary to strive toward two advanced levels of implementation that involve pedagogical change: redesign of the pedagogy (**M**odification) and the harnessing of technology to create new teaching methods (**R**edefinition).

# Distance Learning during Covid-19

The state of emergency generated by the Covid-19 pandemic led to the sudden closure of all educational institutions in Israel. While it was later decided to gradually reopen schools and preschools, higher education institutions were required to maintain distance learning throughout the spring semester of 2020 and subsequently as well.

The sudden transition to distance learning without pausing to plan and adapt posed challenges for lecturers, who had to continue teaching their courses in a reality of uncertainty, while simultaneously maintaining quality instruction and effectual evaluation. They were, for the most part, insufficiently prepared for distance teaching (Gudmundsdottir & Hathaway, 2020). Institutional computing departments offered an immediate solution that included training and personal assistance in resolving problems. But in the field of pedagogy, whose implementation is process-based and requires direct experience, lecturers proceeded by trial and error and by learning from the experience of their colleagues. These difficulties were compounded by the psychological repercussions of the loneliness resulting from a lack of interpersonal contact with students and colleagues (Donitsa-Schmidt & Ramot, 2020).

# How Haredi Students and Teachers Coped with Distance Learning

The sudden transition to distance learning posed additional and unique challenges to Haredi higher education students, men and women, whose numbers have steadily increased over the past decade and who currently account for 3.8% of all higher education students in Israel, 28% of whom attend colleges of education. Their main motive for pursuing academic studies is pragmatic, based on recognition of the changing demands of the labor market and the perception of such studies as an “entry ticket” to work that provides a respectable livelihood (Cahaner & Malach, 2019).

This group is distinguished, among other factors, by a gap in access to new technologies, computers, and Internet, mainly because of ideology and values (Shaham, 2016). The “official” perceptions of the Internet in the Haredi community range from complete rejection to qualified acceptance (Lev-On & Neriya-Ben Shahar, 2009; Shaham, 2016). However, many of the Haredi, particularly those who identify as “modern,” choose to have an Internet connection (Zicherman & Cahaner, 2012). Many Haredi higher education students did not have a computer with an Internet connection, or they had a filtered connection that blocked access to educational platforms and materials (Schiff et al., 2020; Shaham, 2016). Their digital skills were also less developed, given their lack of continuous access to and use of digital technologies (Shaham, 2016).

For Haredi higher education students, the challenges posed by the transition to Internet-based learning were further compounded by challenges stemming from socio-demographic factors. Many of these students are parents to large families, and the presence of young children at home throughout the day, particularly under crowded living conditions, impeded technological access, emotional availability, and the creation of an optimal learning environment (Schiff et al., 2020).

Teaching Haredi students posed a unique pedagogical challenge for lecturers, in addition to the challenges of distance learning generally and the challenges faced by all lecturers at higher education institutions in the sudden transition to distance learning. This challenge related to the planning and management of courses using a format and platform adapted to the cognitive and social characteristics of the students as well as their preferences and outlooks (Dori et al., 2011). At the same time, the lecturers had to try to anticipate the challenges and difficulties of planning that is not sufficiently adapted to the needs of Haredi students. Because the lecturers themselves also had to shift to distance learning on short notice and without preparation, they had to make adaptations for their students “on the go,” on the basis of feedback from the students and by learning their characteristics and the challenges facing them.

The case study in this qualitative study looks at how lecturers at Michlalah Jerusalem College, a religious-Haredi college with a large Haredi student body, coped with the sudden transition to distance learning at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. The study examines the challenges faced by lecturers and their ways of coping with the measures taken by the college administration as these related to receiving guidelines or solutions as well as developing their own managerial independence.

# Case Study: The Shift to Distance Learning at a Religious-Haredi College – Managerial Aspects

The Covid-19 crisis prompted a transition to distance learning at higher education institutions early in the 2020 spring semester. The sudden shift posed many challenges for lecturers. For the most part they were insufficiently prepared for distance learning, and alongside the “technological shock” they also experienced a “pedagogical shock” (Yakov, 2020). In this reality, lecturers were required to ensure effective teaching, meet set objectives, and provide effectual evaluation.

The success of distance learning depends on its suitability to the cognitive and social requirements of the students as well as their preferences and outlooks (Dori et al., 2011). Therefore, alongside the challenges shared by all of higher education in Israel and around the world in the face of the Covid-19 crisis, it is necessary to examine the challenges and struggles that are unique to various sectors in Israel. This study focuses on the Haredi sector, examining the challenges posed at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic to lecturers at Michlalah Jerusalem College, a religious academic college of education with many students who belong to this sector.

The study adopted a qualitative approach and was based on interviews with 45 bachelor’s and master’s degree lecturers at Michlalah Jerusalem College. The study examined the following questions:

1. As a religious-Haredi college with many Haredi students, what unique challenges did the faculty face in shifting to distance learning at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic?
2. From the perspective of lecturers at the college, how well did the college administration manage (guidelines, consultation, direction, and presentation of various options) during the crisis?

# Field Research

The study was conducted at Michlalah Jerusalem College, one of the oldest academic colleges of education in Israel, located in the neighborhood of Bayit Vagan in Jerusalem and serving students, men and women, from the religious and Haredi sector. The college has four departments for academic degree studies: a full bachelor’s degree track for women, a shortened track for men who graduated from yeshivot, a continuing education program for women who graduated from Haredi seminars with a “senior certified teacher” certificate who wish to complete a bachelor’s degree, and a graduate school. During the 2019-2020 academic year, these four programs had a total of 1,769 students, men and women. Nearly all the students enrolled in the Department of Continuing Education are graduates of Haredi seminars. In the other departments, a significant proportion of students are Haredi, enrolled alongside national-religious students and, in particular, national-Haredi students.

Most of the college’s courses are taught in person. In addition, students in all the departments are offered more than 120 mandatory and elective courses in a range of fields for independent distance learning using digital platforms, printed workbooks, or a combination of the two.

As in other academic institutions, the college faculty was not prepared in advance for an emergency transition to distance learning. The college provided a range of real-time training and support services for teaching through the “Model” and “Zoom” systems. In addition, the college made it possible to offer course instruction with the aid of a telephone and email for students without Internet access. In the Department of Continuing Education, lecturers were asked to use only these tools. When it became clear that the colleges would remain closed for an unknown period, the heads of the college sent a letter to the staff asking lecturers to prepare for the continuation of distance learning, with the overriding goal of “maintaining the college’s quality of education, while at the same time striving to provide maximum support to students to enable them to finish the semester successfully without compromising the timetable for receiving their degree” (Michlalah Jerusalem College, 3 April 2020).

# The Research Method

The study adopted a qualitative approach in accordance with the principles of grounded theory (Shimoni, 2016), and was based on 45 semi-structured interviews with lecturers who taught at the college during the second semester of the 2019-2020 school year. The selection of lecturers was based on the principle of maximum variation sampling (Creswell, 2014), such that the sample included lecturers with different levels of digital skills, who represented the various college departments, religious sub-sectors, and the wide range of ages and years of experience. The participants comprised 30 men and 15 women. Their ages ranged from 35 to 74 (average age 56, standard deviation 10), and their years of teaching experience ranged from 7 to 49 years (average 27, standard deviation 11). Of the participants 42% identified as Haredi, 13% as national-Haredi, and 45% as national-religious.

The interviews lasted 40 minutes on average. In line with ethical standards, the purpose of the study was explained to the participants, and their names were changed in order to maintain their privacy. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed categorically (Shkedi, 2003).

# The Research Findings

1. **Characteristics of the Administrative Guidelines**
2. **Lack of Guidelines**

Media publicity and internal college announcements made it known that regular on-campus studies were suspended, and that the continuation of studies would require a transition to distance learning. Initially deliberations focused on asynchronous teaching that would involve sending out academic assignments, which would then be returned, but after a week or two the discussion began to focus on a shift to teaching by Zoom.

As we shall see below, most of the lecturers noted that the shift did entail the provision of information and instructional videos to those concerned. At the same time, however, some of the statements attest that the transition was chaotic:

For two or three weeks we ourselves did not know right from left… (Sarah).

This was particularly true with respect to technology:

In my view, it is necessary to have readily available and stringent technological oversight. That is, I think someone should oversee my course, and there should be no such thing as somebody not hearing, that the sound is not working, [and it is necessary] that this be very meticulous oversight (David).

The lecturers at Michlalah Jerusalem college were given the option of teaching synchronously through Zoom or asynchronously through videos and written assignments. Lecturers complained about not meeting set objectives, missing the interactive and dialogical dimension of the classes, and difficulties assessing comprehension of the material. Conversely, some lectures saw the pedagogical advantages: the briefer, auditory nature of the class compelled the lecturer to plan the content of the lesson well and to focus on the essence. A lecturer from the Department of mathematics described how the aim of the lesson had changed:

The lesson is not aimed at teaching [the material], but at summarizing what was achieved [through self-learning], asking questions, and airing out issues … A reversed class of sorts – where they are actually tasked with learning and then they come prepared and together we process everything in the class [synchronously by telephone] (Shira).

In addition to dealing with the technological difficulties of the students, some of the lecturers faced difficulties of their own in the area of technology.[[3]](#footnote-3)

In the interviews, lecturers were asked about the college administration’s management in terms of providing guidelines for teaching and learning methods in the transition to distance learning during the Covid-19 pandemic. The lecturers did indeed express confidence in the college’s leadership, but as we shall see below, the issue of delegating authority and responsibility for issuing guidelines, taking initiative, and proposing various solutions and modes of operation branched out into different, diverse, and interesting directions.

**2. Unnecessary Guidelines**

Some lecturers regarded the college administration’s guidelines as unnecessary and even “burdensome.” It should be noted that this perception related to the initial phase of the shift to distance learning:

At first the college lost its way… Eventually, I feel, the college recovered and we found a good routine. But during the transition phase… I had to prepare a table every week indicating the tools I would use… separately for each course… The college is very trusting… No one monitors what I’m doing in each class and how I do it. That was burdensome (Tziporah).

What emerges from these remarks is the gap between the lecturer’s expectations, given what she had become accustomed to over the years, and the newly evolving situation. For this reason, the requirement of reporting seemed burdensome and added to the sense of loss of leadership and control.

**3. Clear and Tailored Guidelines**

On the other hand, most of the interviewees did describe a state of preparedness, guidance, and direction through updates and even the provision of solutions and ways of implementing them:

There was preparedness, direction, guidance, and leadership as well as close monitoring and immediate resolution of challenges (Moshe).

There was leadership in terms of preparations [as well as] regular updates, [which gave me] a better understanding of how to prepare and what to do and the special circumstances of the students (Yitzhak).

In terms of the outcome, the preparation was good; as a lecturer, I received clear guidelines and so did the students (Yehezkel).

Interestingly, the word “leadership” appears as part of the positive description of change, pointing to a general perception that the administration exercised leadership over the process (not only in the details).

**4. Partial Guidelines**

4.1 Preliminary guidelines

Other lecturers described the college management as providing only a preliminary and general solution, leaving it to the lecturer to continue the practical implementation of providing lessons and solutions for communication and interaction with the students:

The preparations gave me a sense of order and I understood the importance and immediately prepared to implement all the lessons and exercises; I was assisted by my wife, who is well-versed in technology, otherwise I would have had to use the support services of the college (Yitzhak).

Phrased another way:

There was an umbrella of assistance (Tehilah).

4.2 Guidelines in defining needs but not in detailing the process

It emerges that according to most of the interviewees, the administration provided only partial guidelines for the shift to distance learning. This partial nature sometimes took the form of messages from the college about “what” to do without specifying the “how”:

There was general preparedness; there was a decision about what to do but not how to do it; the technical knowledge was insufficient; in this respect I exhausted the technological possibilities that I was aware of, sharing by Zoom, questionnaires, what I knew and was familiar with (Yishai).

4.3 General guidelines

The partial nature of the guidelines sometimes took the form of broad, general definitions, without support for the technical details. Nevertheless, it appears that most of the lecturers did not view this as a deficiency or as a need that they expected the college administration to address:

Covid-19 caught everyone by surprise; it’s okay to lower expectations considering the surprising situation. I felt that this was the point of the guidelines, that is, to demonstrate “availagility” (availability and agility) while upholding the fundamental requirements (Iscah).

4.4 Proactive or passive guidelines

Another distinction in relation to the partial nature of the administration’s approach is between passivity and activism (on the part of the lecturers) in requesting assistance, as reflected in the following remarks:

I thought there was proactiveness in the preparations by the college administration… There was attention to the new structure of learning; I needed support, (I asked) and I received it (Sheri).

**B. Managerial Autonomy**

In addition to the partial nature of the guidelines, another major issue that emerged from the interviews centered on the managerial autonomy that the lecturers received or took, willingly or unwillingly, from the college administration. The lecturers were asked to describe the degree of autonomy they received from the college administration in terms of initiative, decision-making about their course, the conduct of the interaction, its frequency, matters of time, and tasks.

[The college] demonstrated flexibility and did not force the lecturer to make the transition one way, and this gave me more motivation to succeed (Nehama).

Notably, it was actually flexibility, or opportunity for the lecturers to take initiative and seek solutions, that increased their motivation to search, find, and even “succeed” in the shift to distance learning, as the following remarks indicate:

The college actually made it possible to communicate and manage in any way whatsoever. The college also offered assistance throughout the semester through videos and even close guidance, but I preferred to learn by doing…” (Baruch).

**C. Management as an Enabler of Change**

References to “guidance” on the part of management and “independence” of the lecturer were perceived as enabling the lecturers to introduce change.

I received guidance on the goal and we had a free hand to implement the change, they trusted us. I prepared very quickly for the change including [through] the training I received (Yossi).

I did not feel coercion in relation to my independence [regarding] how to teach, although there was a defined framework (Rivka).

Indeed, most of the study participants, lecturers at the college, stated that they needed these general, preliminary, and primarily informative guidelines from the administration, but at the same time they needed “autonomous authorization” in managing their affairs following the transition to distance teaching. This was reflected through initiative, seeking and finding solutions and making adaptations, and the continuous management of their courses.

# Discussion, Conclusion, and Implications

A manager knows what needs to be done, but [just as] my plumber is the one who knows how to open a blockage, and I need to trust him … the college needs to know what to require and what to let go and turn over to the lecturer. This way the output will be much more efficient. The lecturer should not be small minded. The lecturer can convey his knowledge, and he is the best expert as to the platform. He should be given the choice of doing this (Yossi).

We can deduce a few key phrases from the above quote and use them to summarize the study’s findings: knowledgeable manager, trust, balance between “requiring” and “letting go,” output and efficiency, the lecturer as an expert, and choice and autonomy.

Quite naturally, the study found that the lecturers’ attitude toward the college’s guidelines ranged along a scale from statements about chaos and the lack of guidelines to descriptions of guidance and full support (and even to the guidelines being unnecessary). A majority of the lecturers presented various definitions of the “partial nature” of the guidelines, and most of them commended the fact that the guidelines were partial, or at least viewed this situation as foreseeable and appropriate.

The professional-technological knowledge of the interviewed lecturers also ranged from non-technological to expert, and a correlation was found between critical remarks about the administration’s guidance, made by lecturers who are not proficient in technology, and statements that commended the independence granted to lecturers, which came from the more proficient ones. This is particularly characteristic of a college with religious-Haredi characteristics, and for this reason the issue of conduct and management is emphasized. The study demonstrates that “enabling management” is the appropriate approach in a situation of uncertainty, and all the more so when the range of knowledge and skills for operating and accessing technological-online teaching tools such as Zoom is so vast.

An important and instructive finding that emerges from the interviews relates to the managerial autonomy between a manager and his or her staff, and in the present case between the college administration and the lecturers. Most of the study’s findings indicate that even lecturers who were critical of the insufficiency or lack of efficiency in the administration’s guidelines, as well as lecturers who spoke positively about the college’s management of the shift to online teaching, commended the managerial autonomy they received and mentioned their need for it.

This matter attests to the need to change the “attitude” of the manager or the management toward the faculty, precisely during a time of uncertainty that is also recognized as a state of pedagogical crisis. The manager as an initiator, facilitator, leader, and presenter of managerial options makes way, in a time of uncertainty, for the manager who allows his or her lecturers to initiate, facilitate, lead, and present options, and even to implement them!

As indicated above in the remarks by the lecturer named Yossi, lecturers are interested in having managers who trust the staff when it comes to searching for and finding solutions out of a variety of options. The same balance between letting go and asserting requirements is evident when a manager conveys openness to proposals by lecturers, because it is the lecturers who are the experts in their field in terms of familiarity with the student body and the type of teaching best suited to a given situation. By focusing specifically on a college with a population that has inherent difficulties managing and accessing digitally based distance learning, the study demonstrates the need to balance between issuing top-down guidelines and allowing the staff to manage their affairs and take initiative. The two final terms in the above quote, which are at the core of the interviewees’ remarks in this study, are choice and autonomy. In a period of uncertainty, managers need to choose to grant autonomy to the staff and to position themselves as enabling the outcomes and implications of that autonomy.

A study conducted in Australia among school principals following the outbreak of Covid-19 (published by the Ministry of Education Knowledge Team in Israel in May 2021) found that principals whose leadership encourages autonomy among teachers succeed in reducing stress, emotional burden, and exhaustion among teachers (Collie, 2021). This study can be seen as validating the argument that granting managerial and even administrative autonomy to staff in times of uncertainty is an appropriate way to meet the needs of the time.

In light of the review above, in addressing the issue of pedagogical management in educational institutions in a period of uncertainty, one may formulate the matter as follows: Pedagogical leadership for change, in a period of uncertainty that requires adaptive leadership, is characterized by the need for “availagility” and the development of a “dance floor” of educational activity managed by a “principal’s desk” that enables inclusion and implementation of initiatives and adaptations by teachers in (distance) learning and teaching.

In terms of the balcony and the dance floor, one may conclude that the findings of this study indicate that in matters of management in times of uncertainty, it is actually the teachers who will find the time to be on the balcony as well, and the managers/principals will navigate the myriad solutions proposed by the teachers from the dance floor.

This case study of lecturers’ perceptions of the administration’s management of the shift to distance learning at a religious-Haredi college indeed attests to the need for adaptive leadership that is characterized by the granting of managerial autonomy to the faculty, in such a way that they become the initiators and implementers while the managers serve as change enablers.

To sum up, the vision of school leadership in a period of uncertainty can be set out in one sentence: Pedagogical leadership and directing change during a period of uncertainty require adaptive leadership characterized by agility and day-to-day educational work “on the dance floor” managed from the principal’s desk which allows the implementation of innovation and initiative from the teachers responsible for the (distance) learning.

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1. This article is partially based on Heifetz, R. A. (1994). *Leadership without easy answers*. Cambridge: Belknap Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. However, see above that the principles of VUCA prime ostensibly conflict with this approach in their emphasis on the need for vision (as an anchor) during a period of uncertainty. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For a description of these difficulties, see the parallel study by Shenhav et al. (forthcoming, 2021) regarding the transition to distance learning during the Covid-19 pandemic at Michlalah Jerusalem college. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)