Influence of crisis-management and pre-crisis planning on the leadership and internal organizational communication in times of crisis in German SMEs

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Declaration

I declare that the work in this thesis was carried out in accordance with the regulations of the University of Worcester and is original except where indicated by specific reference in the text. No part of the thesis has been submitted as part of any other academic award. The thesis has not been presented to any other education institution in the United Kingdom or overseas. Any views expressed in the thesis are those of the author and in no way represent those of the University.

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Abstract

Considering the current COVID-19 pandemic and that most of the businesses face crisis, but much press attention focuses on the crisis facing big organizations. Every country in the world relies heavily on the SMEs (small and medium-sized companies) sector for employment and economic development (especially in Germany, where SMEs constitute 99.6% of all enterprises). Sadly, the scholarly literature about crisis management and the influence of pre-crisis preparation on crisis management and leadership in SMEs is not very impressive. The author attempted to understand and interpret a reality reflection in the social reality of crisis actors. The capacity of company owners/managers to think strategically in the middle of a crisis is critical to the long-term sustainability of a firm. This qualitative research paper is trying to clarify whether the pre-crisis planning in SMEs is a good decision or not for SMEs owners and/or managers in order to be more resilient, and to see its impact in the leadership and internal organization communication in times of crisis.

Key words:

small medium enterprises, SME, crisis planning, crisis management, leadership, crisis, internal organization, internal communication, business resilience, small business

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1. Introduction

This chapter offers context for the research topic: the importance of pre-crisis planning, organizational communication, and leadership in the crisis response of German SMEs. The research challenge is introduced, and the discovery of gaps in the literature explains the problem's roots. A reason for the research is offered, and the contributions to knowledge achieved by this research are summarized. The overarching research technique of the thesis is explained, as well as a detailed synopsis of each chapter of the thesis.

1.1. Background to research

A crisis is an unexpected, unplanned situation or hazard that affects an organization without notice. It refers to an occurrence that endangers the viability of an organization. Crisis Management is the practice of efficiently managing and dealing with such occurrences or threats. Fink (1986, p. 15) stated that "crisis management is the art of removing much of the risk and uncertainty to allow you to achieve more control over your destiny". According to the findings of the literature review, as well as other sources, it is concluded that the majority of crisis management research focuses on large organizations (Booth, 2015; Dyson and t'Hart, 2013; Elliott et al., 2010). Yet, the crisis management of SMEs has not been thoroughly explored to develop good theory and practical management consequences (Herbane, 2010). According to the current crisis communication tradition, internal crisis communication is a novel study issue in crisis management (Heide, 2003). The external part of crisis management research may be separated into sections, for instance, how do SMEs protect their credibility during a crisis (Coombs and Holladay, 2002), ethical criteria and crisis communication standards

(Coombs, 2021) and leadership role in crisis events (Jamal and Bakar, 2015). Coombs (2021) investigated how crisis management plans influence internal communication in times of crisis.

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) comprise both micro-enterprises with a few employees and lucrative firms with many employees. Every country's SME sector contributes significantly to employment and economic development (Herr and Netekoven, 2017). According to the World Bank (2021), SMEs make for the vast majority of enterprises globally and are "critical contributors to job creation and global economic development" (Saifurrahman and Kassim, 2021, p. 311). It is also said that SMEs account for around 90% of all firms and more than 50% of all jobs globally. In emerging nations, official SMEs generate up to 40% of national income (GDP), and these figures rise significantly when informal SMEs are also included. As per World Bank, 600 million additional jobs will be required by 2030 to handle the world's rising workforce, making SME growth a primary focus for many governments throughout the world. Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) generate the preponderance of formal employment, accounting for 70% of jobs in developing nations. Access to capital, alternatively, ranks second most identified constraint to SME growth in emerging markets and developing nations (Herr and Netekoven, 2017). According to the BMWI (2021), in Germany SMEs (also known as the "Mittelstand") are the "drivers of innovation and technology" (BMWI, 2021, p. 1). In Germany, 58.5% of jobs are created by SMEs, 99.6% of all German organizations belong to the "Mittelstand" and they account for 35.3 percent of overall sales in Germany (BMWI, 2021).

SMEs, like major corporations, are prone to restructuring, which is a common feature of economic development and frequently occurs because of the emergence of a crisis in a company. The bulk of widely highlighted reorganization instances involve huge corporations and troubled businesses. SMEs are not given the attention they deserve in the media. For example, the 2008 financial crisis demonstrated that the economic and employment situation in smaller organizations is more stable (in the short run) than in bigger firms (Sahin et al., 2011). Despite a drop-in company expectation, employment prospects for small and medium-sized businesses remain positive.

A lot of studies have indicated that the absence of crisis management plans in SMEs is very common - 49% of SMEs in the UK did not have a plan beforehand to deal with the crisis (Herbane, 2010). As a result, it is critical to analyse how SMEs can be more resilient, with a pre-crisis strategy, otherwise the SMEs resilience will be unaffected. In this thesis, pre-crisis planning concerns the stage before the crisis when the business can detect and correct the early warning signs to improve foreknowledge (Herbane, 2010). Crisis management on the other hand is deemed the acceptable response during and after a crisis (Sahin et al., 2011). Although pre-crisis planning is, by definition, part of crisis management, the difference is established for the reader's convenience. For example, Mitroff (1994) who studied management in crisis times as a cyclical process, proposed that there are possibilities to disrupt the crisis lifecycle, while Herovic et al. (2020) argued that the pre-crisis period is devoted to crisis prevention via risk communication and educational activities.

Many authors underlined the importance of leadership in every organization's administration (Bolden, 2004; Coleman, 2000; Obholzer, 2018). It is particularly important for small and medium-sized businesses. An SME's structure and stage of development dictate the necessity for a changing leadership style. SME leaders, unlike their larger counterparts, frequently have a higher "level of hands-on" engagement in a range of areas, such as leadership, strategic decision-making and financial management (Fokam, 2016).

Relational signals are encoded in both verbal and non-verbal communication; hence communication is believed to be essential in defining our connections with others (Burgoon, Buller, Hale and deTurck, 1984).

When all this knowledge is combined with the experience, the basis of interest is formed and insights into the research topic, especially now, during the COVID-19 pandemic, where a lot of companies are dealing with crisis.

1.2. Research questions

This study's research questions are as follows:

1. **What influence does pre-crisis planning have on leadership in times of crisis?**
2. **Can the internal organization communication model be implemented in a pre-crisis planning in SMEs?**
3. **How can crisis management influence leadership in times of crisis?**

Based on the gap in the literature, it is concluded that previous experiences of owners and/or managers in SMEs can contribute to the knowledge. It showed the influence of crisis management generally in SMEs and on leadership and communication before, during and after the crisis.

1.3. Justification of the study

A literature review revealed no prior research on the determinants of crisis management and pre-crisis planning in Small and Medium Enterprises, either on the leadership of organizational communication in times of crisis. Mainly, it is because of the limited amount of literature about SMEs in general and leadership and crisis management in SMEs.

The literature review combined with expert interviews in this research give a better understanding of the connection between crisis management and pre-crisis planning on SMEs leadership and communication.

This study has advanced academic understanding in an area of crisis management and communication in SMEs that has not before been studied. Additionally, this research will assist owners/managers of SMEs to provide better results and to lead their company through the crisis more effectively.

1.4. Methodology

Because little is known about the impact of pre-crisis preparation and crisis management in SMEs on leadership and internal communication in times of crisis due to a lack of prior academic research on the issue, this study's nature is exploratory (Swedberg, 2020).
While examining the research problem and questions, owners/managers of SMEs were interviewed in attempt to discover their opinions and previous knowledge and experience about crisis management and pre-crisis planning and their effect on leadership and internal communication in times of crisis.

In chapter four, the four scientific research paradigms were examined and analysed, and a reason was made to explain why constructivism is the most appropriate research paradigm for the study. In addition, various research approaches are examined, with reasons given for why the qualitative methodology was chosen as the best for this study. Chapter four's conclusion was that the semi-structured interview, utilizing open-ended questions, was the best qualitative data collection strategy for allowing participants to express their own ideas and deliver complicated replies (Mishler 1986; Patton 2002; Tavory, 2020).

A semi-structured interview guide was produced, tested, and polished prior to performing the interviewing. The participants agreed for interviews to be recorded and transcribed, then sent to them for verification and then translated from German to English in order to be analysed for the purpose of this research. The five-step data analysis technique of Sarantakoses (1998) was used in this study. Those steps are:

i) transcription;

ii) examining and revising;

iii) analysis;

iv) generalization; and

v) verification.

Patton's (2002) approaches based on cross-case analysis were utilized in the analysis and interpretation process.

1.5. Thesis outline

The first chapter (introduction) establishes the context for the thesis and discusses the research issues. The research limits are stated, and a thesis outline is presented.

The second chapter (literature review) outlines all the research's major themes. A thorough assessment of the literature was undertaken on SMEs and their importance, crises, crisis management, pre-crisis preparation, and leadership. The examination of leadership literature looked at the distinctions between large corporations and small businesses in order to discover the best leadership model for SMEs. The communication models were also reviewed.

The third chapter (methodology and research design) examines the four research paradigms and explains why the constructivism was chosen as the most appropriate paradigm. The three main research approaches are discussed, with a reason for why the best study method was qualitative research. There was additional rationale for why the semi-structured interviews were the optimum data collection strategy. Chapter 4 covers the methods and techniques used to conduct the semi-structured interviews, as well as concerns like ethical considerations, as well as research validity and dependability. The format for data collecting is introduced. The findings are also presented in Chapter 4 (data analysis and findings) and discussed in relation to the literature review.

Conclusions about the research concerns are explained in detail, and a redesigned framework is offered as a solution to the study challenge in Chapter 5. The research study's shortcomings are explored, and other research ideas are suggested.

1.6. Limitations of the research

This study focused on German SMEs, from whom data was acquired, and related to crisis management and pre-crisis planning in SMEs and their impact on leadership and internal communication in times of crisis. Therefore, the research findings may be relevant to other German SMEs, but not necessarily to SMEs in other countries.

1.7. Aim and Objective of the research

This study addresses a research topic that is primarily generated from experience. It describes the constructs of internal communication, engagement, and leadership in the initial stage. This contextual elaboration seeks to discover how these components interact in an organization, particularly in small and medium-sized firms (SMEs) during times of crisis. However, to fully understand the behaviour of an organization's leadership, it was required to explain the similarities and differences, as well as the mutual connections between these structures.

The fundamental objective of this research is to explain and understand a mirror of reality in the actors' social reality. It is consequently critical to incorporate many viewpoints to comprehend how individuals build their reality during a company crisis. The capacity of company owners/managers to think strategically in the middle of a crisis is critical to an organization's long-term survival, but there is currently little advise available on how to do so most successfully (especially in SMEs). To be resilient in times of disaster, organizations must manage a series of seeming paradoxes that indent successful planning against adaptation to changing conditions, such as:

1. Can leaders inspire people with a feeling of optimism and purpose while being grounded in their situation?
2. Does the organizational culture emphasize rigorous planning while also encouraging creativity and crisis preparation?
3. Plan and make judgments with care and structure, while being responsive and courageous.
4. Can teams discover patterns and incorporate data to make sense of a crisis state while remaining sensitive to minor changes as it evolves?

In this scenario, exploratory research is very valuable for developing a knowledge of a specific topic. It has the advantage of being more adaptive and flexible to change, allowing the researcher to begin with a broad emphasis and then narrow it down throughout the course of the project based on data or developing insights, as indicated. Therefore, the main aim of this research is to explain and interpret a reflection of reality (voice of participants, voice of owners and managers) on a crisis in German SMEs.

2. Literature review

The literature review intends as the research's theoretical foundation. To find relevant research, a comprehensive review of the literature is conducted. An initial review of the literature revealed that there is little research on the influence of leadership behaviour on the implementation of organizational communication components in business crises.

Most of the current literature is focused on employee behaviour or the crisis itself, rather than leadership behaviour. Crisis management is described as a Pearson and Mitroff (1993) defined crisis management as a process of systematization that should detect signs of crisis before it occurs, and thus prevent the crisis from occurring, as well as preparing the organization for a possible impending crisis and later dealing with it, as well as recovering from the crisis itself and perfecting the plan for the possible future crises.

In addition, much of the extant literature, according to Berghoff (2006) and Eggers (2020), is focused on the huge business sector. According to Berghoff (2006), the fact that huge corporations are more visible and politically powerful does not justify neglecting SMEs, despite the fact that their size and variety make them more difficult to examine. The study of the management of SMEs has an extensive history and has evolved into a corpus of knowledge with various types of interest, such as leadership, entrepreneurship, and finance. In smaller organizations, on the other hand, emphasis on crisis management is uncommon. Small company-oriented publications, in particular, suffer from a severe lack of literature. For example, no article published in the prominent small businesses' journals from the beginning of 1990's referred to "crisis management" or "business continuity management" (Herbane, 2010). This begs the issue of why crisis management isn't often chosen as a topic for a research study in the context of a small business (Herbane, 2010).

There are three papers that are considered beneficial for purposes of this research, as follows:

1. Small business research: time for a crisis-based view (Herbane, 2010)

Despite a rising tide of regulation and legislation requiring companies to have crisis/business continuity management arrangements in place, Herbane (2010) highlighted the relative absence of crisis management research in the small business literature, as well as the absence of a small business focus in the crisis management literature. Herbane (2010) used case studies from UK small enterprises and investigated the knowledge of, as well as the funding and support for, crisis management. The author exposed risk understanding, three-dimensional crises, crisis learning, and restricted support systems; and found that owner-managers may frame risks in two ways – as a "growth vulnerability paradox" and a "risk elastic" – while their perception of crises is conceptualised utilising.

This research from Herbane (2010) helped in this research by highlighting how important pre-crisis plan is in the SMEs sector. Also, it highlighted how significant is to do the research on SMEs crisis management, considering that nowadays SMEs are the very important part of World economy.

2. Struggling with internal crisis communication: A balancing act between paradoxical tensions (Heide and Simonsson, 2015)

Heide and Simonsson (2015) developed a social constructionist approach to crisis communication, focusing on issues such as complexity, sense making, and symmetrical relationships. They also provided a quick summary of the little but expanding research on internal crisis communication in the first section. While the intricacy of internal crisis communication necessitates the viewpoint, Heide and Simonsson (2015) have discovered a proclivity towards simplistic *either-or* thinking.

This particular research explained the construct of internal crisis communication and helped to develop the theoretical framework for this research.

3. Management, strategy, and policy in the UK small business sector: a critical review (Beaver and Prince, 2004)

The purpose of this research was to first examine the role and features of the SMEs and its collective, the SME sector. There was a brief assessment of the SME rhetoric and research agenda. The authors conducted a critical evaluation of the SME management situation. A critical examination of the strategic management method revealed that strategic action in the SME sector is far more informal, intuitive, and invisible than design school supporters previously stated. After that, this study examines policy's function and evolution, as well as its influence on the survival, growth, and performance of SMEs.

2.1. Literature search strategy

Research questions:

1. What influence does pre-crisis planning have on leadership in times of crisis?

2. Can the internal organization communication model be implemented in a pre-crisis planning in SMEs?

3. How can crisis management influence leadership in times of crisis?

A systematic literature review, according to Fink (2005, p. 3), is “a systematic, explicit, and reproducible approach” for locating, analysing, and interpreting the current body of documented work generated by researchers, academics, and practitioners. Initially, systematic reviewers were commonly used in domains such as medical (Tranfield, Denyer, and Smart, 2003), but business and management studies are increasingly turning to systematic reviews of the literature, particularly in evidence-based investigations (Bryman and Bell, 2011). According to Bryman and Bell (2011), such assessments are useful for decision-makers, especially when there is contradictory data about the optimal way to accomplish tasks. Structured literature reviews are useful as a supportive activity, according to Fink’s definition and Bryman and Bell’s (2011, p. 57) observation – “*the best way of doing things*”.

Therefore, this exploratory study focuses on identifying, from the literature, the connection between Crisis management and Leadership role in SMEs. The research seeks to examine whether a pre-crisis planning model can be implemented for all SMEs.

The relevance of the strategy for searching is finding important and accessible studies that match the goal of the literature review. The literature research started with looking for the relevant researches in the various databases using relevant keywords. Using this basic strategy, a large quantity of journal articles linked to the study subject of interest may be located. Furthermore, a full list of relevant academic publications was prepared, and published papers were personally reviewed and included in the review where appropriate. In addition, different search tactics were used, which resulted in the discovery of additional material that couldn’t be discovered in the records. This involved going over the references of the research retrieved and evaluating which of them appeared relevant. Subsequently, the exploration was carried out repeatedly until the task was completed satisfactorily. Even though an exhaustive search of the literature was done, it could not be stated that all existing articles were included.

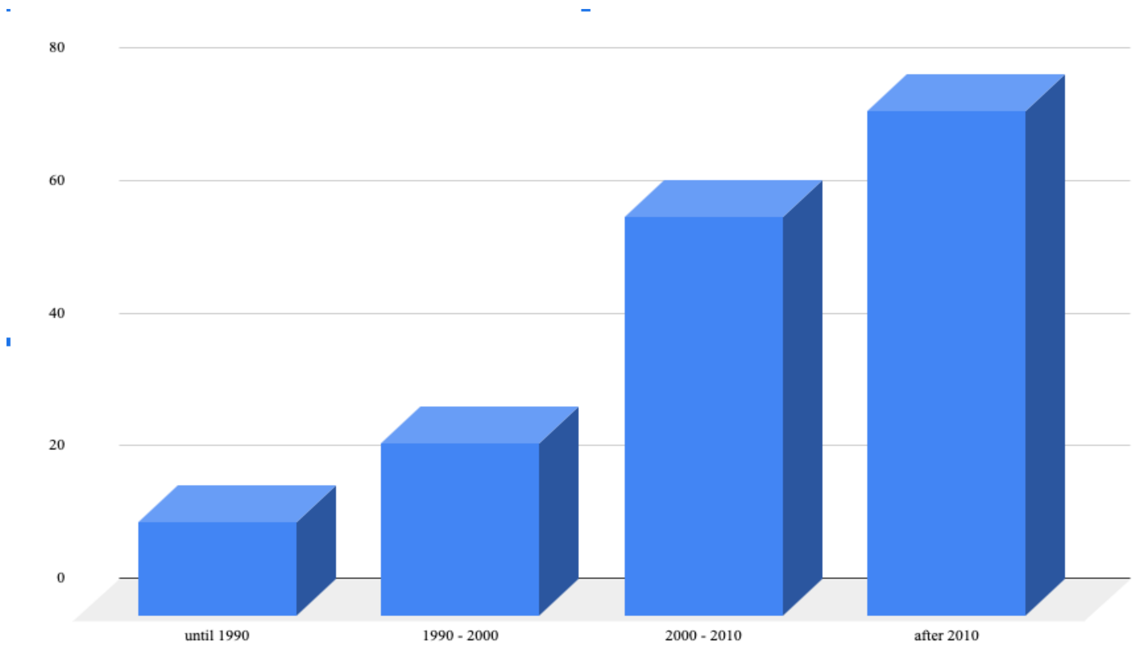

Figure 0.1 SUM of the number of Articles and Year

As may be seen in the figure 2.1, the number of studies and journal articles about the topic significantly increased over the past decade, since the term SME and crisis management itself became more popular. Also, the search based on keywords increased during 2020 and first half of 2021 due to the Coronavirus crisis (COVID-19). As mentioned earlier, it is hard to find relevant articles about SMEs particularly, since most of the research is based on large organizations. According to researches, there is a paucity of literature on crisis management for small and medium-sized businesses. For example, according to Runyan (2006, p. 4), “the crisis management literature has not dealt in depth” with small organizations reaction to crisis. According to Hong et al. (2012), little is known about how SMEs plan, react, rebound, and expand during crisis occurrences. This assumption is supported by Jacobsen’s (2018) study on organizational size and innovation, arguing that SMEs may have a greater implementation cost while benefits may be lesser when compared to bigger organizations with more resources. Aside from the scarcity of literature about crisis management in SMEs, according to Küffer and Uglem (2020), the requirement for crisis management in SMEs emphasizes the need of investigating the topic from both a practical and theoretical standpoint. Conceptual framework.

2.1.1. SME and its importance

SMEs are both micro-enterprises with just a few employees and profitable small businesses with more employees, but they do not have a broadly agreed definition. The Federal Ministry of Economic Affairs and Energy of Germany defines SMEs as companies with fewer than 500 employees or annual revenues of less than 50 million euros (The Federal Ministry of Economic Affairs and Energy, 2014). SMEs, according to the European Commission, are businesses with less than 250 people or annual revenues of less than 50 million euros (EC, 2017). The KfW, Germany's government-owned development bank, defines SMEs as businesses with annual revenue of up to 500 million euros (Schwartz, 2016), accounting for 37.4 percent of the UK economy's total annual turnover (BEER).

Every country on the planet relies heavily on the SME segment for jobs and economic prosperity. The SME sector, on the other hand, is quite diverse. Herr and Nettekoven (2018) stated that here are start-up SMEs that drive innovation, efficiency gains, and fundamental improvements. Also, traditional SMEs that adapt to market demand but do not develop much on their own. And finally, those authors stated that there are poverty-driven SMEs, which represent a lack of social protection and entrepreneurship as well as surplus labour.   The impact of constantly changing business settings and the advent of additional crises on SMEs is significant (Mikušová, 2011). SMEs are particularly vulnerable to crises due to a lack of financial and human resources to implement an effective crisis management strategy (Anghel et al., 2013).

Mikušová (2011) argued that many SMEs, on the other side, feel that proactive crisis is overpriced and ineffective since it cannot prevent a crisis from emerging. Also, SMEs can have a deficit of required resources (like crisis management professionals on their staff). According to Mikušová (2011), many SMEs are confused about how to act in times of crisis and have a hazy understanding of what management of crisis entails. The financial ramifications are far-reaching to warrant engaging outside crisis-managers. According to the same author (Mikušová, 2011), a small number of SMEs build, maintain, and have a crisis team. Organisations that have adopted crisis management strategies have certain characteristics; for example, having faced a crisis before, with 5-10 employees, and where the owner is also a manager of the firm.

Furthermore, Spillan and Ziemnowicz (2013) point out that SMEs in general are unconcerned with strategic crisis management if they have never faced one before. SMEs would only adopt strategic crisis management once a crisis has occurred, and they would focus more on reactive protection and recovery efforts rather than prevention, according to the report (Keller et al., 2005). As a result, Herbane (2010) and Runyan (2006) emphasize the importance of systematic crisis preparedness owing to a lack of financial resources, control, and time to respond. Furthermore, Perry (2001) stated that numerous impediments to SMEs' recovery from the crisis might exist, such as a lack of capital, fragility of cash flow, and the time-consuming procedure of "monetary contributions".

Therefore, the ability to overcome these obstacles is critical to a company's long-term survival.

2.1.2. Crisis Management

2.1.2.1. What is the crisis?

"*A crisis is an unanticipated, unplanned event or threat that strikes a company without warning*" (Holenweger et al., 2017, p. 4). It refers to an occurrence that "jeopardizes a company's viability". Crisis Management, on the other hand, is the practice of efficiently managing such occurrences or threats. A circumstance in which time is of the essence and an immediate and effective decision must be made is crisis. The problem causes a sense of loss of control throughout the organization, worsening the situation. As a result, according to Holenweger et al. (2017), crisis management must be rapid and impactful, with crisis management solutions that are flexible enough to deal with similar unforeseen events in the future.

A crisis, according to the Concise Oxford Dictionary (Sykes, 1985), is a "turning point; a moment of peril or suspense in politics or trade". This phrase was expanded by Fink (1986) to include "a turning point for better or worse", "a pivotal moment", or "crucial time". According to Fink (1986, p. 15), crisis management is the "*ability to reduce much of the risk and uncertainty so that you may have greater control over your destiny*".

Crises are not isolated events arranged efficiently on a timescale that is linear, but rather dynamic and chaotic processes. A crisis can "*smoulder, flare up, wind down, and* *flare up again*", based on the sequence of physical events, as well as how the media, politicians, and the public frame and interpret these events (Boin and Hart, 2003, p. 3). As the crisis impinges on and is created by the larger developmental environment of the society in which it happens, the scope of the crisis may extend and decrease depending on which topics and concerns dominate attention at certain time points (Porfiriev, 1996).

2.1.2.2. Different types of crisis

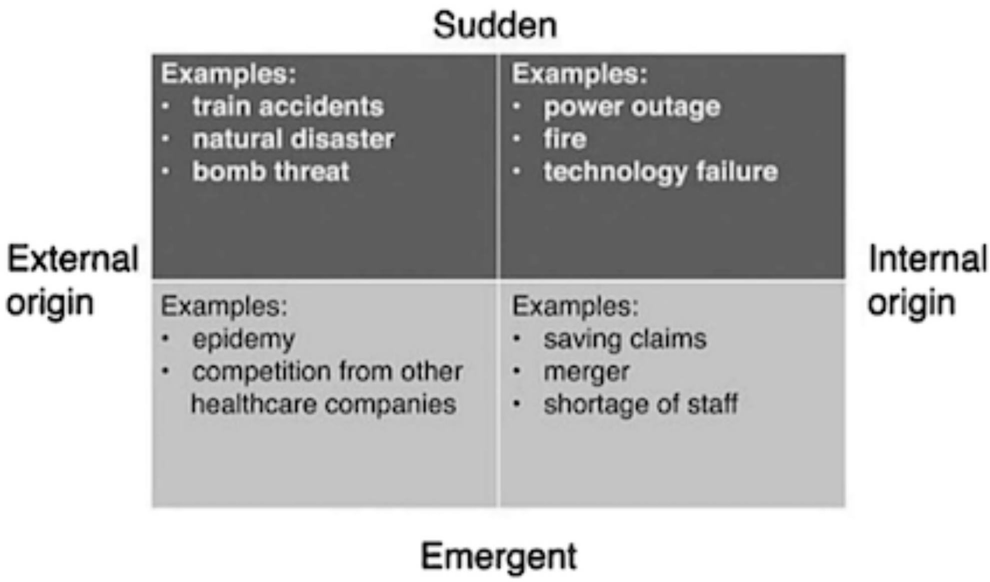

Figure 2.2: Four field typology of crises (Source: Heide and Simonsson, 2019)

Heide and Simonsson (2019) constructed a theory of four-field typology of crises based on two separate factors to clarify numerous sorts of crises:

- *Suddenly occurring versus slowly emerging crisis:* A sudden occurrence of a crisis has more or less immediate implications and necessitates a quick reaction from the organization's leadership and others. They meant catastrophes that emerge gradually over time when they said “slowly developing.” Emerging problems rarely necessitate comprehensive and systemic solutions.

- *External versus internal origin:* Where did the crisis occur - within or outside the organization

Considering that this research is about crisis management and internal crisis communication in SMEs in Germany, it is concluded by the end of this research that crisis typology has great impact on internal crisis communication, pre-crisis planning, as well as leadership.

According to Pearson and Clair (1998), organizational crises are “low-probability, high-impact events” that are considered as endangering the sustainability of organization and are subjectively experienced by these persons as personally and socially unpleasant by crucial stakeholders. In times of crisis, “stake” is perceived as a danger by stakeholders. According to James and Wooten (2005), over three-quarters of all organizational crises are caused by internal factors (see Figure 2.2 above-saving claims, merger, shortage of staff).

Individuals, groups, organizations, and nations can be ranked on a scale depending on who they influence (Vigsø, 2015). This implies that it is subjective, based on the individual or, for example, society as a whole (COVID-19). Co-workers and their family, suppliers, owners, and consumers can all be affected by organizational crises (Heide and Simonsson, 2019, p.19). There are five basic forms of organizational crises, according to Shrivastava and Mitroff (1987), which are divided into internal and external difficulties. They differentiate between two dimensions, internal and external. According to them, a crisis might result from technological or organizational shortcomings. Light (2007) created a framework that distinguishes between the technical/economic and human/organizational/social crises (Table 2.1 below). Crawford (2020) adopted Ravitch and Riggans' (2017) concept of defining conceptual framework as why the topic someone is studying important and why the proposed research is suitable.

Type	Examples of internal crises	Examples of external crises
Technical/economic	Major industrial accidents Product injuries Computer breakdown Defective, undisclosed information	Widespread, environmental destruction Natural disasters Hostile takeover Societal crises Large-scale systems failure
Human/organizational/social	Failure to adapt to change Sabotage by insiders Organizational breakdown Communication breakdown On-site political tampering Illegal activities	Symbolic projection Sabotage by outsiders Terrorism Executive kidnapping Off-site product tampering Counterfeiting

Table 2.1: Types of crises (Source: Light, 2007)

Organizational crises can emerge for a variety of reasons and can endure for a short or lengthy time. They might be easy or difficult to forecast, and they can also be easy or difficult to influence. As a result, Parsons (1996) proposes three different types of organizational crises and their durations:

1. *Sudden crisis:* sudden, organizations not able to plan

2. *Emergent crisis:* slowly emerging, firms can use extensive action plans to prevent or mitigate them.

3. *Sustained crisis:* can persist for weeks, months, or even years at a time.

Gundel (2005), for example, defines conventional crises as those that are easily predicted and manageable. A retirement of an employee might be an example of such a problem. Unexpected crises, such as the flu outbreak, are also readily impacted but difficult to forecast. Intractable crises, on the other hand, are those that are "difficult to affect but easy to forecast". Fundamental crises are difficult to forecast and influence, such as pandemics or natural disasters.

Type	Easy to influence	Hard to influence
Easy to predict	Conventional crises	Intractable crises
Hard to predict	Unexpected crises	Fundamental crises

Table 2.2: Gundel's typology of crises (Source: Light, 2007)

2.1.2.3. Crisis Management

Complex crisis events (including natural calamities, political and social transformations, and economic disruptions) occur in today's tumultuous business climate. Pearson and Claire (1998) set a theory which advise that in order to cope with these crisis situations, whether internal or external, businesses must respond quickly and effectively- crisis management; in order to survive and grow.

Crisis management research includes a diversity of viewpoints, such as crisis ramifications, strategic leadership, and vision, as well as technical capabilities (Mitroff et al., 1996; Preble, 1997; Sayegh et al., 2004). Furthermore, it is concluded that the majority of crisis management research focuses on large organizations (Booth, 2015; Dyson and t'Hart, 2013; Elliott et al., 2010). SMEs' crisis management techniques, on the other hand, have not been thoroughly explored to develop good theory and practical management consequences (Pearson and Claire, 1993; Küffer and Uglem, 2020).

Internal crisis communication is a relatively recent area of study in crisis management, according to the modern tradition of crisis communication (Heide, 2003). In the previous four decades, the focus of crisis communication study has mostly been on the external aspect of communication in times of crisis (Johansen et al., 2012). External aspect of crisis management research may be separated into areas such as how SMEs preserve their reputation during crises (Coombs and Holladay, 2002), ethical standards in crisis communication (Kim, 2015), and the function of leadership in crisis events (Kim, 2015; Jamal and Bakar, 2015). Heide and Simonsson (2015) have also looked at how pre-crisis planning affects communication in times of crisis in larger organizations.

To resolve an organizational crisis, it is necessary to update all of the key business concepts and modify the strategic perspective in order to produce an initial scenario that will lead to future development (Pollard and Hotho, 2006). As a result, crisis management has become a critical issue for many businesses. Crisis management is a method of dealing with crises methodical. It foresees and assesses dangers and develops strategies. The tactics are employed to redirect threats, lessen the crisis's impact, or perhaps attempt to avoid it altogether (Alijuhmani and Emeagwali, 2017). Stakeholders both inside and outside companies are involved in crisis management (Taneja et al., 2014). As a result, according to Alijuhmani and Emeagwali (2017), owners and/or managers must participate in crisis management to deal with the issue, establish a pivotal moment, and open the door to new progress inside the company.

According Küffer and Uglem (2020, p. 4), crisis management is a wide discipline that includes concerns such as crisis *"impact, strategic visions, leadership, and technical capabilities*".

Pollard and Hotho (2006) defined strategic management as a continual process rather than a one-time occurrence. A decade later, Johnson et al. (2017, p. 3) defined strategy as "The direction and scope of an organization over the long term: ideally, which matches the resources to its changing environment, and in particular, its markets, customers or clients to meet stakeholder expectations". According to both above-mentioned authors, strategic management is frequently focused on these stages:

Strategic analysis: Determine and study the organization's macro- and microenvironments.

Strategic direction and choice: Development and selection of strategies and strategic orientations to achieve corporate goals and missions. Knowing what is desired and doable for the company in terms of resources and competencies is critical.

Strategy implementation and control: Creating appropriate "financial and human resource strategies, organizational structures, and leadership" to monitor strategy implementation. To properly implement a plan, it requires some degree of change and good management.

Strategic evaluation and feedback: Improved and regulated strategies are required on a regular basis. These acts assist businesses enhance and pick the best approach by increasing the learning impact. Strategic evaluation includes not just performance indicators, but also signals resulting from changes in the external environment.

There are many parallels between crisis management and strategic management. According to Smith (1992), a crisis can cause a company's strategy plan direction to alter, like establishing additional regulations or performing a total transformation. A crisis, on the contrary, might take a firm in new directions and possibly even new chances that were previously unattainable. Environmental circumstances, stakeholders, and the function of managers and their engagement are all assessed in both processes.

Organisations should incorporate crisis management in their strategic management, according to Preble (1997). Both processes work together to give firms with not just strategic planning, but also the ability to avoid disruptions or external difficulties. Crisis management mitigates and prepares for unanticipated events, whereas strategic management removes ambiguity and leads to certainty.

The strategic management approach, on the contrary, has to be adaptable based on the type of crisis. Ritchie (2004) developed a paradigm that blends strategy and crisis management with "the anatomy of a crisis". Crisis mitigation, strategy, and plan execution stages of the strategic management process are all included in the framework. Furthermore, all three of the preceding procedures are linked to the various stages of a crisis.

All proactive planning and strategy formulations are contained in the stage of crisis prevention and planning. Several strategies have been explored to do this, according to Ritchie (2004):

- *Scenario planning:* fictitious circumstances that lead to a conclusion. The final state has an influence on the decisions taken.
- *Strategic forecasting:* forecasts of possible crises, origins, as well as their consequences for firms.

- *Contingency planning:* contingency preparations in the event of a catastrophe that disrupts a company's usual strategy approach. It increases a company's flexibility and speed of response.
- *Issues analysis:* detects and warns external environmental patterns, which are then used to the benefit of the organization.
- *Integrated emergency planning:* the establishment of an emergency reaction teams and a warning system.

Managers must gather information on possible crises and devise ways to address them with all of these tools. Shifting from analysing to strategizing and developing pre-crisis plans is critical. Ritchie (2004) stated that certain steps have to be implemented in order to prevent the crisis from occurring again, right after identifying a crisis.

According to Ritchie (2004), if the crisis arises, it has entered the second stage of its lifespan. The strategic implementation stage begins in this situation, as shown in the table below. As a result, detailed contingency or emergency plans must be created to mitigate the effects. Because the stage of implementation can be complex, adaptability and observation are essential for:

- The strategy's selection and implementation
- A crisis communication technique that is effective
- Controlling and relocating resources

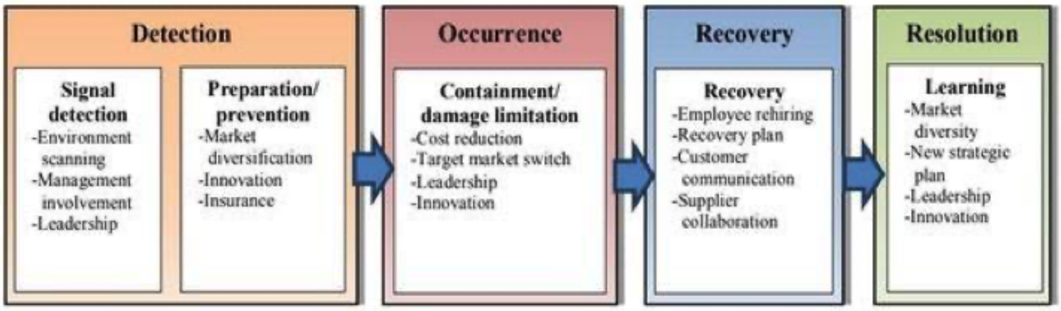

Figure 2.3: Detection and occurrence of the crisis (Source: Hong et al., 2012)

In the crisis management process, the last stage is resolution, assessment, and feedback. After the organizations start to recover from the crisis that has happened and begin their reinvestment plan to return to their pre-crisis status. Some firms may also benefit from the crisis. They may, for example, gain a better position than before the crisis – like "more recognition in other markets and increased innovation" (Ritchie, 2004, p. 42). Furthermore, such occurrences might improve an organization's capacity to learn. Owners/Managers can restructure the company, from management to pre-crisis plan, or even make a complete paradigm shift as a result of their experience (Ritchie, 2004).

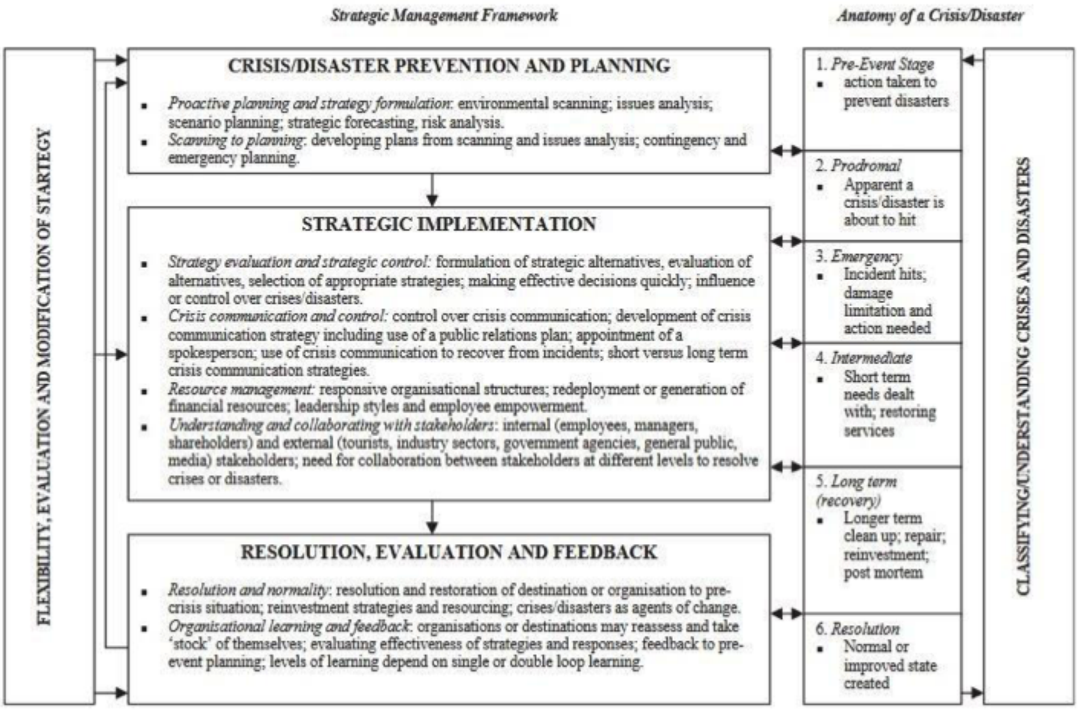

Table 2.3: Anatomy of a Crisis (Source: Ritchie, 2004)

More than 99 percent of European businesses are small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) - 99.6% in Germany (Figure 2.4) and around two-thirds of private sector employment (EC, Fact and figures analysis), thus it's critical that they get special attention. Communication and decision-making, as well as communication and managerial control, are all intertwined, according to Luthans (1973). In the event of a trust crisis, Sellnow and Seeger (2013) stated what is related with the development of this kind of crisis: missed signals, improper communication about a threatening situation, flawed perceptions, and lack of action on warnings. Therefore, according to Palm and Falkheimer (2005), trust crisis can be divided into:

- Moral trust crisis
- Competency trust crisis

Despite the apparent benefits, research demonstrates that small businesses frequently lack crisis management. The necessity, together with the found absence of crisis management theory in SMEs, it might be claimed there is a need to investigate into the issue from both a practical and theoretical standpoint. SMEs are battling to survive, particularly during the COVID-19 epidemic. According to Nau news articles in Switzerland (2020), SMEs are at a high risk of bankruptcy and experiencing significant sales losses. 46 percent of the enterprises polled said they anticipated to go insolvent, and 7 percent indicated they already fired employees. Furthermore, a report published in the Neue Zürcher Zeitung (2020) stated that SMEs with up to 10 employees are severely impacted, emphasizing the necessity for greater research into crisis management theory for SMEs. The epidemic is widespread, affecting SMEs in a variety of nations. According to the Swedish tabloid Di (2020), more than 60% of small and medium enterprises feel the COVID-19 pandemic crisis will have a substantial influence on business. Additionally, the EIB (2020) claimed that small and medium enterprises have undergone a significant transformation and are particularly vulnerable to negative consequences. SMEs are more labour-intensive and vulnerable to disruption owing to factors such as quarantine and lower liquidity reserves.

According to one research, the size of a company has an impact on whether they use crisis management (Johansen et al., 2012). According to this particular study, larger organizations were more likely to adopt crisis management. Small businesses differ from large businesses in numerous ways, including the fact that they generate less revenues and typically have fewer employees (Runyan, 2006). They may not have the same resources, expertise, or capabilities as larger enterprises when it comes to crisis management. According to Fors-Andrée (2020, p. 13):

"Large organizations often have more resources to put together a crisis team, to divide the work, have more spokesman persons, and to create proper crisis plans (...)."

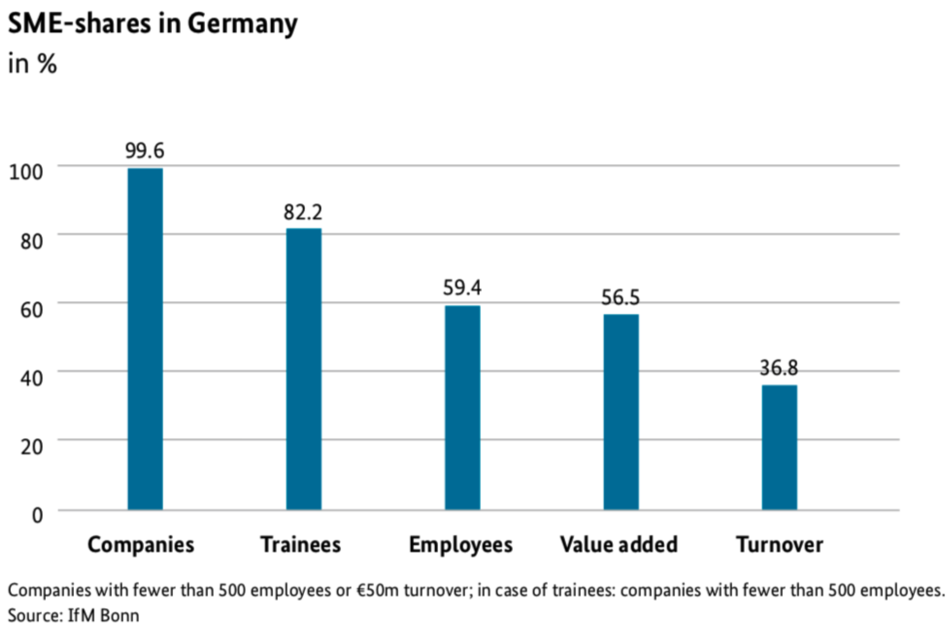

Figure 2.4: SME-shares in Germany (Source: IfM Bonn)

Employees are more likely to behave differently in times of crisis than they are in regular times, according to Sellnow and Seeger (2013). SMEs, like major corporations, are prone to restructuring, which is a common feature of economic development and frequently occurs because of the emergence of a crisis in a company. The bulk of widely highlighted reorganization instances involve huge corporations and troubled businesses. SMEs aren't given the attention they deserve in the media. For example, the 2008 financial crisis demonstrated that the economic and employment situation in smaller organizations is more stable (in the short run) than in bigger firms.

Despite a drop-in company expectation, job prospects for the small and medium enterprises sector remain favourable. According to the IAB job survey, almost a million positions were unfilled in the second quarter of 2014, with over 412,000 in firms with fewer than 10 workers and over 573,000 in enterprises with up to 500 employees. As per AG Mittelstand (2020), 250,000 new positions in the small and medium enterprises were generated in 2019. SMEs, for example, contribute around 37 percent of overall business turnover in Germany. Also, it is mentioned that one in two SMEs in Germany is active on foreign markets (Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Energy Germany, 2019).

According to Alpaslan et al. (2009), crisis management consist of two phases: preparation (where organizations attempt to communicate with prospective victims or stakeholders to avert a crisis) and reaction (where organizations attempt to respond to a crisis that has already occurred) (organizations aim to minimize losses that result from crises). Furthermore, many stakeholders are claimed to deny these two phases, implying that no planning is performed. It will not be beneficial to deny responsibility. However, several warning signals are claimed to precede crises, and one of the key goals of crisis management is to recognize these signals (Heide, 2019).

According to several studies, SMEs lack crisis management strategies. For example, 49 percent of UK SMEs did not have a strategy in place to cope with the crisis (Herbane, 2010).

Conventionally, the area of crisis management focuses on what an organization does when faced with a crisis. Nevertheless, considered what was already discussed in this chapter, it is concluded that crisis management is used before, during and after the crisis in order for the organization's resilience. On the other hand, Caponigro (2000) defined crisis management as the role that attempts to mitigate the impact of a crisis and aid the company in regaining control. Thus, competent crisis management is considered necessary, proactive preparation to avert crises and lessen the consequences of crises that are unavoidable is also essential. This crucial aspect of crisis management has received little attention to date.

This chapter describes what a crisis is, how to manage a crisis, and the necessity of crisis management in both large and small businesses, as well as the value of SMEs themselves.

2.1.3. Pre-crisis planning

2.1.3.1. What is pre-crisis planning?

Besides the fact that the overall number of firms engaged in crisis preparation grew after September 11, 2001, it remains disturbingly low (Hough and Spillan, 2005; Eggers, 2020). The main purpose of crisis management is to lower the impact of an unforeseen incident in an organization's life (Spillan and Hough, 2003). According to an Oxford Executive Research Centre research, organizations that have been able to put crisis recovery strategies into action decreased their initial negative equity effect by 60 percent; organizations that were incapable to carry out plans saw early damages of 11 percent of their total capitalization (West, 2003). In reality, data suggests that executing crisis plans effectively not only controls crises, but also gives “afflicted” firms a competitive edge.

The act of proactively analysing and resolving vulnerabilities to avoid or minimize the effect of crises is known as crisis planning. It emphasizes on the tasks that should be completed before a crisis occurs (Hough and Spillan, 2005).

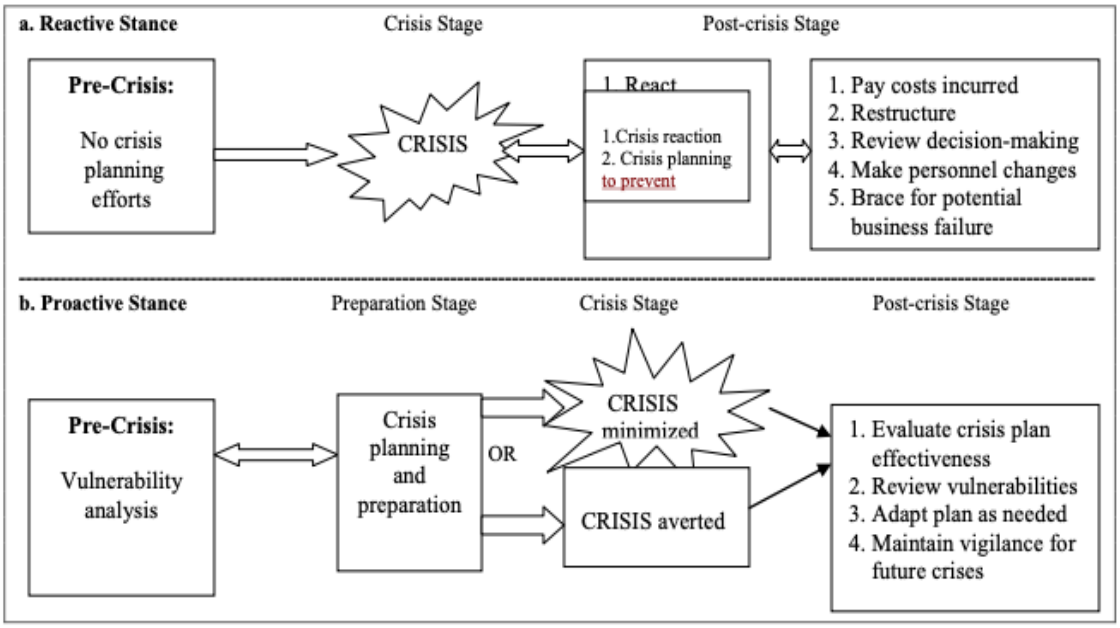

Figure 2.5: Events in crisis situations – reactive and proactive stance (Source: Hugh and Spillan, 2005)

Figure 2.5 depicts the events that occur during a crisis. Decisions concerning the crisis are taken in the reactive position after the incident has occurred. Managers that take a proactive approach have anticipated crises and done vulnerability studies in order to establish plans for dealing with future crises. Each managerial choice has far-reaching repercussions. Managers must compare the cost of planning for a catastrophe against the potential losses of failing to plan. Clearly, having some form of crisis preparation procedure is beneficial to the business's long-term existence (Hough and Spillan, 2005). Pre-crisis preparation was separated into five following phases by these authors:

1. Forming a Crisis Team
2. Analysing Vulnerabilities
3. Creating Strategies
4. Working the Plans
5. Assessing Performance

They also noted that the crisis team's and leadership's expertise and experience are vital, and that leadership should work the plan to the degree that is reasonable (Hough and Spillan, 2005), but be adequately competent and adaptable to adjust to changes as occasions warrant. They also emphasized that it is critical to employ prior crises plans and experience irrespective of the outcome, because analysing previous performance, as well as comparing actual performance to the plan's predictions, always delivers valuable lessons for the future.

Several researches have indicated that small and medium-sized businesses lack established crisis management plans. For example, according to a study conducted by Bank of Scotland (2003), 2 million SMEs in the UK were unable to contend with dangers like criminals or natural catastrophes. In a study, where 1000 SME owners/managers participated, 49 percent said they had no preparations ready to cope with risks to their company's survival. According to recent research (Gallagher, 2019), 60% of UK SME company executives revealed that they do not have a crisis plan in place – or did not know whether one existed – and nearly half of UK SMEs (47%) incorrectly assume that business insurance alone will shield them from crises. Similarly, according to a study of AXA insurance firm, 46 percent of small and medium enterprises do not have a plan in place to deal with a business interruption (Economist, 2005). Only 40 percent of participating SMEs did have a pre-crisis plan in place.

Another recent research (Eggers, 2020) claims that the present COVID-19 epidemic is worsened by the "liability of smallness", or a scarcity of resources to benefit the resilience of SMEs against external shocks. Despite terrorist attacks, such as the London bombing in July 2005, Royal and Sun Alliance (2006) found that 59 percent of UK firms had a pre-crisis plan. Regarding a company's influence to disruption, this survey discovered that 63 percent of businesses would regard a one-day shutdown to be a danger to their operations. Furthermore, 35 percent of businesses did not have business interruption protection, which is sometimes substituted for proper business continuity planning. This insurance (protection) would not include intangible assets such as public image of an organization, consumer goodwill, according to Spillan and Hough (2003). When questioned about risks, owners/managers stated that direct weakness and closeness to the risk were the most important factors. Organisations are frequently warned that they are more prone to remote risks, such as the interruption of network connectivity caused by undersea cable damage (BBC, 2008).

According to recent research done in Sweden (Fasth, et al. 2021), the COVID-19 pandemic requires further systematization to strike a balance between structure and flexibility. In the research of information security in 60 US SMEs (Keller et al., 2005), 88 percent of participants had completely or partly prepared information systems safety policies, and respondents were aware of the threat to their ICT properties posed by internal threats. Keller et al. (2005) went on to say that as an organization's ICT operations get more formalized and specialized, the likelihood of formalizing processes for ensuring ICT security increases. The only flaw in this study that is published is that it does not explain why respondents submitted the responses that have been published. According to the earlier mentioned research, between 40% and 59 percent of small lacked a comprehensive crisis strategy, while another advocated for a more codification of IT-related strategies. This lends credence to the notion that when hazards are recognized and foreseen, strategies are made. In comparison, if a danger is not identified or predicted (or is ambiguous and/or not completely understood), it is less likely to receive formal planning consideration. The emphasis on the availability of a plan is a flaw in most studies since it not only ignores motivations and contextual elements, but it also assumes that the possession of a plan is a suitable replacement or indication of crisis management capacity. A strategy might effortlessly be turned not effective in a crisis because it has not been tried or is technologically and resource-wise outmoded.

Spillan and Hough (2003) and Runyan (2006) are rare study cases that looked more deeply into crisis preparedness in small businesses than just finding the existence of a plan amongst participants. Runyan (2006) emphasizes the scarcity of crisis management research in SMEs and emphasizes the impact that the crisis may have on SMEs due to inadequate preparation, weakness, and individual influence of a crisis on the leader (e.g., lost revenues) that does not always occur in the case of larger organizations. According to one research, crisis management experts were focused on bigger organizations, and nothing was linking this field to SMEs (Spillan and Hough, 2003). Data from their research of American organizations revealed that the occurrence of a crisis, and less as the existence of a crisis management team, was responsible for greater concern about crises. SMEs who had been through a crisis, not unexpectedly, expressed higher fear about future crises than those that had not. Lastly, a crisis management team's involvement was not connected with apprehension about the organization’s vulnerability to crises. The Spillan and Hough research identifies the adage that there is no replacement for experience (of a crisis) as the primary motivator for the establishment of formal crisis preparedness. Else, they argue, managers in small businesses place little emphasis on such preparation. Furthermore, while tutoring from the third part may raise knowledge of the effects of a crisis, it is significantly less effective in altering the emphasis than first-hand encounter with a crisis – even if the latter may not result in the organization’s survival in the outcome of a crisis (Herbane, 2010).

What could explain the absence of official usage of crisis management in SMEs? According to John Sharp, the financial expenses of implementing these strategies for increased organizational resilience reflect a “purchase with resentment” (Cann, 2007). An additional explanation is that less structured ways to preparation predominate in SMEs, as was observed in the case of strategic planning (Fletcher and Harris, 2002).

2.1.3.2. Scholars have a divided opinion on pre-crisis planning

According to Branicki et al. (2017), planning, resources, abundance, highly established formal procedures and systems, as well as redundancy, play a critical role in large companies but are absent in SMEs. As a result, she is thinking about micro-foundations (entrepreneurship and individual resilience). Because of a lack of access to funding, SMEs often have less resources than bigger enterprises. SMEs, on the other hand, have the advantage of requiring fewer formal systems. These SME traits help reduce decision-making chains and accelerate reaction times in the event of a crisis. In her research article, she demonstrates that, while Battisti and Deakins (2012) argued that SMEs lack resilience, this is not entirely accurate, because SMEs have several benefits that bigger enterprises do not.

Furthermore, there is an inconsistency on pre-crisis preparedness. The literature provides little direction on how leaders in SMEs should conduct in times of crisis. Firms must respond in a timely and effective manner (Drummond, 2004).

According to Heide and Simonsson (et al.,2019), firms should avoid pre-crisis preparation and overconfidence in crisis plans because this is not crisis management. However, other researchers, such as Coombs (2006), argue that a great focus should be placed on the necessity of crisis preparation, which is synonymous with crisis management. Fern-Banks (2016), for example, views crisis plans as a "collective brain" that organizational members may employ during times of uncertainty and confusion.

According to Heide and Simonsson (2019), crisis preparedness might provide an unnecessary sense of security. Is that correct? Perhaps for larger corporations. SMEs, without a doubt, have a shorter management chain and a closer relationship between owners and employees, allowing the crisis plan to be employed more effectively. According to Marra (2004), companies with crisis plans manage crises worse than those that do not have strategies in place. This is only true if the organization spends too much time and effort developing crisis plans and not enough time and effort implementing the plans and developing crisis awareness.

To begin, internal communication is concerned with handling dependency and developing reciprocally advantageous connections among the business and its personnel (Men and Bowen, 2017). According to Men and Bowen (2017), the internal communication system is made up of three parts: corporate internal (launched by communication department), leadership (has an impact on employees), and peer (horizontal) communication.

For example, Stanislav Shekshnia (INSEAD Professor of Entrepreneurship) and Kiril Kravchenko (Gazprom Neft) stated in May 2018 that good CEOs are ready for crises at any time (Williams, 2018). They also stated:

> "*When the usual mechanisms for decision-making break down, the equilibrium that existed beforehand evaporates and the level of uncertainty rises. Algorithms, heuristics, and rules and procedures that used to deliver*

good decisions become irrelevant, if not counterproductive. The situation calls for entirely new solutions. The management team has to make sure the company finds these solutions before it's too late".

In times of crisis, a management team must have numerous options ready. In reality, SMEs should consider creating a crisis model for crisis circumstances. It is true, as stated in many studies, that it is hard to forecast when a crisis will occur, but by assuming it is unavoidable and not closing their eyes to it, SMEs may diminish its exceptionality and bring it into the realm of "regular" situations, making it simpler for everyone in the organization to deal with the worst-case scenario (Williams, 2018). As a result, by establishing a model for crisis circumstances, as well as by analysing and detecting hazards. He also stated that his company recognizes that taking risks is part of their employment, but that they are emotionally and physically prepared for the situation when a crisis occurs, because when a company can adopt a distinct behavioural style on "short notice", it prepares them for the time when a crisis strikes.

When a crisis develops, the strategy is to act fast and strategically. If SMEs had done pre-crisis preparation, they would be in a great position to begin disseminating information to employees even if they did not have specific solutions. That is, they must have a plan in place so that they do not have to construct a crisis communication strategy in the thick of a disaster. What will happen in the case of a crisis should be included in the plan (mentioned in a research diary-portraying CEOs who already experienced corporate crises).

A question may arise: **Is pre-crisis planning a good investment?**

Although pre-crisis preparation might be costly, it is often far less expensive than the harm that a crisis can do.

2.1.4. Leadership

2.1.4.1. What is leadership and how it is important in SMEs?

Leadership is a multifaceted concept in which leaders' direct followers to a shared goal (Mikkelson et al., 2019). While there are several theories about leadership (e.g., Bass, 1998; Cashman et al., 1976; Northouse, 2021; Pearce, et al., 2008; Underdal, 1994;), understanding a person's style in relationship circumstances is one notable approach to characterize that individual as a leader (Hackman and Johnson, 2012).

Small and medium-sized businesses are critical because they foster innovation in both supplied products and services as well as technology and management procedures. Investments allow access to new technology, which ultimately leads to the development of the firm and ensures its competitiveness, and, ultimately, the development of the national and European economic systems, with SMEs being seen as the motor of the European economic system.

Many authors underlined the importance of leadership in the administration of any business. It is especially important for SMEs. An SME's structure and stage of development, in particular, dictate the necessity for a changing leadership style. SME leaders, unlike their counterparts in bigger firms, often have a greater impact on participation among various spheres of accountability, consisting of management, team leadership and motivating (Lorenzon, 2017). Specific essential skills of a leader, such as “having a clear vision”, communicating effectively at all levels in the organization, motivating and “leading by example”, are held in common by all organizations, regardless of size. However, SME leaders must recognize that each stage of an organization's life cycle brings with it unique possibilities and problems that must be addressed via the use of various leadership styles, such as transformational and conscious leadership. During the early stages of a business, a primary duty of a leader is to motivate the employees by conveying their “vision and purpose”. Their work is built on more flexible arrangements, and followers are more likely to be interested and motivated without much effort on the leader’s side (Lorenzon, 2017). Leadership is a “process of social influence that maximizes the efforts of others toward the attainment of a goal” (Kruse, 2013, p. 17).

Tamkin (2012) suggests that great leaders enable performance in others around them because they see these individuals as the path to success. Furthermore, Rickards and Clark (2012) state that great leaders must be able to deal with difficulties and people creatively, defining creativity as the act of discovering or inventing something new and beneficial. Tamkin (2012) adds that a good leader must also be able to “connect action and reaction” in order to optimize workforce engagement and performance. Simultaneously, Clayton (2012) emphasizes that the global corporate environment, along with logistical and cultural problems, makes it challenging for executives to strike a balance between engaging and controlling personnel. Despite the challenges, Wellins and Weaver (2003) demonstrated that leadership development programs might increase leadership capability, competitive advantage, and organizational structure. Furthermore, Higgs (2003) points out that because the corporate environment is changing, we need new methods of looking at leadership first and foremost.

The focus of leadership study around the turn of the twentieth century was trait theory (Yukl, 2010). According to Svenningsson and Alvesson (2016), the majority of leadership publications are focused on classical leadership ideas. One of them is trait theory, which is based on eight identifiers, according to Bertocci (2009), and is based on intelligence, dominance, self-confidence, energy, tolerance, integrity, honesty, and emotional maturity. These characteristics fluctuate from researcher to researcher, particularly in terms of what makes someone successful, and as a result, scholars have moved on to other ideas, such as self-development emphasis, which incorporates skill development (Berard, 2013).

Compared to bigger organizations, where owner is not a manager and vice-versa, in SMEs owner is usually the manager (Birley et al., 1999). In order to protect the control of the business and their autonomy from external factors (suppliers, banks, etc.), SMEs owners/managers frequently demonstrate aversion to outside meddling and are suspicious of employee (internal) decision-making involvement. An indication of this is that the "directive leadership" might be more widespread, in which owner-managers are probable to wield sole power over policy decisions and employees are merely expected to follow instructions (Wang and Poutziouris, 2010).

According to the literature on SMEs, a variety of individual, organizational, and strategic aspects may impact performance of an SME (Chandler and Jansen, 1992; Eggers, 2020). But there has seldom been a uniform consensus on the influence of leadership on performance. A vast diversity of leadership styles studies acknowledges that owner-managers in SMEs are probable to have a special effect on performance of an organization (Anderson et al., 2003; Northouse, 2021; Pearce, et al., 2008; Underdal, 1994;). Owners/managers are heavily engaged in business administration through operations management, regulating finances, and dealing with employees. As a result, style of leadership of an owner/manager becomes an important component in the mix of elements that influence organization's performance (Yukl,1998; Chaganti et al., 2002, Wang and Poutziouris, 2010).

According to Gottfredson and Reina (2020), the characteristic approach, derived from personality psychology, has been the conventional method that the leadership domain has followed in examining why leaders do what they do. This method has a long history, where in some cultures people believed that some people are "born to be leaders, and some are not" (Plato and Jowett, 1901, p. 175). Academics that have followed this approach were generally attracted in discovering unique attributes that may be widespread through settings. The substantial volume of research on this issue has resulted in several meta-studies, which allowed DeRue et al. (2011) to test this model on leadership behaviours and effectiveness. They selected character, IQ, and sex as the most frequently researched leadership attributes. Unfortunately, this premise, as well as the larger strategy, has serious limits. Mischel and Shoda (2008) argued on this, and Rauthmann et al. (2015) stated that "this approach overlooks reality". Because of these limits, this method's "predictive validity of leadership effectiveness" will always be limited, and they are most likely the basic causes for the relatively poor links between features and leader effectiveness (DeRue et al., 2011; Judge et al., 2004).

2.1.4.2. Types of Leadership and differences between SMEs and large firms

The most significant distinction between how leadership is implemented in a large organization and in a small and medium-sized enterprise is the leader's influence over his employees (Mihai, 2015). Management and leadership are layered in numerous hierarchical levels in a major firm, with "each leader influencing and projecting his own behaviour on a limited number of the company's employees, notably his direct subordinates" (Barling et al., 1996, p. 829). In a small or medium-sized organization, on the other hand, the owner/manager has a direct and personal impact on her/his employees (Bass, 1981); this is because, in most circumstances, he is highly involved in daily processes, and his subordinates can feel his presence. Furthermore, styles employed by small and medium enterprises owners/managers are an indicative of their proclivity for particular leadership behaviours. O' Regan and Lehmann (2008) argued that this should be regarded as an essential component of the company's success formula.

Because the literature on leadership is wide, numerous specialists have proposed several classifications of leadership style. Regardless of theoretical and conceptual disagreements, many of the scholars believe that the benefits and drawbacks of leadership styles cannot be explored until the setting in which the style will be employed is specified (Mihai, 2015).

Autocratic leaders, according to Van Vugt et al. (2004), will do whatever they believe is required to provide for the general good. They select which group members should donate how much and without consulting anyone. Typically, this method may be applied effectively when the leader is acquainted with the steps that must be taken to achieve an objective (Boykins, 2013). According to Lewin et al. (1939), groups headed by an authoritarian leader are more productive than groups led by democratic leaders, and both groupings outperform those headed by laissez-faire leaders in terms of productivity.

Democratic leaders, according to Lewin et al. (1939), stress incorporating the team in decision-making, actively involving their members, constructive praise and criticism, and creating strong interpersonal relationships with their followers. According to Krech et al. (1962), the democratic leader attempts to elicit maximum interest and participation of every member in group activities and in the formulation of objectives. The leader attempts to disperse rather than concentrate responsibility. Burns (1978;2003) supported this view by arguing that democratic leadership is concerned with combining both leaders and followers who work together to create an environment in which both the leader's and the followers' goals and expectations are aligned.

The omission of leadership, the avoidance of involvement, or both can be defined as the leadership style. There are usually no transactions or agreements with followers when the leader is laissez-faire. Decisions are frequently delayed, feedback, rewards, and engagement are lacking, and little attempt is made to inspire followers or understand and meet their needs (Bass and Avolio, 1990). Other proponents of this viewpoint, such as Lewin et al. (1939), argue that laissez-faire leadership is more likely to arise when a leader is nominated rather than elected and chooses to withdraw from daily processes and delegate his responsibilities to his followers. Despite these allegations, there has been little study proving a relationship between this type of leadership as a cause of stress and the impacts on employees (Skogstad et al., 2007).

Strategic leadership, for example, emphasis on the organization's prosperity and longevity; its important audience includes the employee society; it is a long endeavour;

and it comprises an overabundance of concurrent scenarios. Supervisory leadership, on the other hand, is concerned with task fulfilment, its critical audience consists of people; it is medium to short-term endeavour, and it comprises one or a few scenarios. (Kur, 1995). Because of abovementioned significant philosophical and viewpoint differences, tensions between strategic and supervisory leadership usually occur and are challenging to overcome. As a result, it would be a big oversight to begin applying strategic leadership ideas to supervisory leadership (Pechlivanidis and Katsimpra, 2004).

Strategic decisions generate a cascade of sub-decisions that must be carried out correctly (Mintzberg et al., 1976). Manager-leaders (middle managers and supervisors) are often held accountable for the implementation of these sub-decisions. Sub-decision implementation is described as a series of actions that are meticulously carried out in order to create a favourable business outcome in the medium to short term. It is obvious that the specifics of such implementation vary greatly from choice to decision, yet nearly all decisions require efficient execution in order to be effective (Nutt, 1993). In other words, a great choice might be rendered useless if it is not implemented well. Decision implementation is an important feature of leadership success in Europe and the United States (Robie et al., 2001). Even the finest ideas fail to be implemented for a variety of reasons, including insufficient supervision of subordinates (Hill, 1978). According to Kenny (1999), persons who execute choices to the best of their abilities are frequently those who made them.

As already mentioned, according to Allen, Jimmieson, Bordia, and Irmer (2007), supervisory leadership is perceived as a reliable source of accurate, timely, valuable, and job-related information. For example, Mitroff (2001) observes that in larger firms, there is a clear distinction between crisis management and crisis leadership (which does not exist in SMEs): The word crisis management refers to the process of responding to crises after they occur. It denotes a low-level managerial activity. Many people associate crisis leadership with being proactive and high-level. It is about doing all humanly possible - all the “right things” to avoid crises from occurring.

Mitroff’s contrast between crisis management and crisis leadership is analogous to the divide between a limited and comprehensive response to crises. Crisis management in businesses may be defined as episodic: a crisis occurs, and managers and executives are required to engage in operational crisis management for a period of time. Crisis leadership, on the other hand, is ongoing and strategically oriented at managing the underlying system weaknesses that crises frequently manifest.

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) have unique hurdles in terms of business strategies and innovation. Firstly, when attempting to reorganize internal resources, several constraints arise, resulting in an internal barrier to value development for example a scarcity of human and financial resources to commit to resource lock-ins (Parida et al., 2012). Secondly, small and medium-sized businesses can compensate for a "lack of internal resources and competencies" by identifying and engaging with external stakeholders (Parida et al., 2012). Despite the fact that SMEs have a greater comparative advantage because of characteristics such as flat hierarchies, smaller businesses use external resources more than bigger firms, and an increased risk-taking proclivity, they make insufficient investments in acquiring the skills required to utilize these resources, which inhibits businesses from improving their value proposition. (Parida et al., 2012). Finally, the small size of small and medium enterprises results in a lack of scale economies and poor negotiating power with suppliers and consumers, affecting their capacity to capture value (Battisti et al., 2019). At first glance, these findings appear to corroborate the basic premise of a linear relationship among supply incomes and outcomes, but they fall short of capturing the complexities of inventive endeavours. The use of resources through organizational structures and competencies appears to be more essential than resource endowment (Rosenbusch et al., 2011).

Type of leadership	Viewpoint	Focus and purpose
Supervisory leadership	Viewed as a trustworthy source of accurate, timely, useful and job-related information (Allen et al., 2007).	Focuses on the accomplishment of tasks, its critical audience involves individuals and/or teams (Kur, 1995).
Strategic leadership	Making strategic decisions concerning the products and services of organizations and markets; selection of key executives; allocation of resources to major organizational components; formulation of organizational goals and strategy (Beehr and Gupta, 1987).	Focuses on the survival and success of the organization, its critical audience involves the community of employees (Kur, 1995; House and Aditya, 1997).
Automatic leadership	These leaders will do whatever they feel necesarry to provide the common good. They decide which group members should contribute how much without asking anyone for input (Van Vugt, 2004).	Only used efficiently when the leader is familiar with all the tasks and team has little or no experience regarding the matter (Boykins, 2012).
Democratic leadership	Democratic leaders focus on ivolving the team in their decision making. They are actively involving their members, constructive praise and criticism and building strong interpersonal relationship with followers (Lewin, 1939).	Involving both leaders and followers who work together in order to create an environment in which both the leaders' and the followers' goals and expectations are aligned (Burns, 2003).
Laissez-faire leadership	The absence of leadership - there are generally neither transactions nor agreements with followers. Decisions are often delayed feedback, rewards and involvment is absent, and there is no attempt to motivate followers or to recognize and satisfy their needs (Bass and Avolio, 1990).	Empirical studies documenting the correlations between this type of leadership as a cause for stress and consequences for the workers are scarce (Skogstad et al., 2007).
Conscious leadership	Refers to deliberate process whereby a leader takes the essential elements of both the short-term and long-term dimensions of leadership into account in the exercise of leadership (Nickerk, 2013).	Inspires and evokes greatness, trusts in self and others, continues to grow and learn, serves those who follow (Renesh, 2010).
Transformational leadership	Transformational leaders integrate creative insight, persistence and energy, intuition and sensitivity to the needs of others to "forge the strategy-culture alloy" for their organizations. In contrast, transactional leaders are caracterized bz contigent reward and management by exception styles of leadership (Avolio et al., 1991).	Transactional leaders develop exchanges of agreements with their followers, pointing out what followers will recieve if they do something right, as well as wrong (Bass and Avolio, 1993).

Table 2.4: Different types of Leadership, definitions and use; adapted for this research

As crises get more complicated (both in large corporations and SMEs), it becomes increasingly vital for persons in positions of leadership to be able to handle crises effectively (Heide and Simonsson, 2019). Most of the research is aimed at large organizations, which have different resources and demands than SMEs. For example, the study ignores the fact that not all firms, particularly small enterprises, are "bottomless pits", and that financial and time resources are limited (Manning, 2004).

Crises are dynamic and chaotic processes, not discrete occurrences structured neatly on a linear timescale. As the crisis imposes on and is created by the larger developing environment of the culture in which it happens, the breadth of the crisis may expand and decrease depending on which themes and concerns dominate attention at different moments in time (Porfiriev 1996). According to Boin and 't Hart (2010), most crises are preceded by incubation periods in which policymakers misread, are unaware of, or flatly disregard repeated warning signs of oncoming danger in large organizations. The issues that prevent leaders in large corporations from observing threats are numerous and important. Leaders are frequently drowned in a sea of information and guidance. Furthermore, they are bombarded with unclear and conflicting messages. Notices do not appear all of a sudden; instead, they are disguised in research, advisory memoranda, or a casual comment from a co-worker. The cautions must be extracted from a slew of apparently inconsequential indicators. Furthermore, bad news encounters strong impediments on its route to the top of the organization, and these obstacles are inherently social in nature. Nobody wants to inundate the boss with information. Leaders in large businesses are particularly vulnerable to "silences" in the corporate communication pattern. This is not the case with SME's since, as previously said, the director (leader) frequently has more than one job in the entire business. It is not uncommon for CEOs from larger corporations to fail to lead a small business (Saini, 2014). This is mostly due to the fact that in larger organizations, one individual in the team frequently has one specific role, but in SMEs, the leader is usually responsible for the majority of the responsibilities, together with personnel.

Managers that are creative will be able to develop something worthwhile, whether it is in the form of concepts, techniques, or processes, as well as commodities and services (Meutia, 2017). Leaders with a proactive attitude aggressively recognize, develop, and affect their environment (Li et al., 2010). They will take the initiative to effect change in their surroundings. (Chang, 2015), and will react to their targets in novel ways and provide radical innovations to increase their performance (Kim et al., 2010). Leaders with such personality are also able to detect opportunities and go above and beyond (Odoardi, 2015). They are constantly "eager" to learn new things and hone their skills (Presbitero, 2015). Proactive people are more inclined to take advantage of any chance from a typical job requirement (Jawahar and Liu, 2016).

Economic growth will decelerate during a financial crisis, thus only firms with high competence will survive (Ismail, 2016). Managers must be creative, which is one of the skills they must have (Meutia, 2017). Proactive personality is associated with innovative behaviours such as the generation of new ideas and the demonstration of creativity in one's job. Those people are constantly upgrading their abilities and new methods to execute task. (Kim et al., 2010).

2.1.4.3. Reactions of employee to leadership behaviour

Dasborough (2006) contended that leader behaviours elicited good or bad emotional reactions in workers; they remembered more bad episodes than good incidents, and they remembered them strongly and more detailed. As a result, leaders might need to use their emotional intellect to provide emotional uplifts in order to overcome the workplace difficulties that people appear to recall clearly (Dasborough, 2006) (See Figure 2.6. below). Furthermore, Bass (1998) stated that leaders may exhibit transformational leadership behaviours in order to elicit good employee feelings.

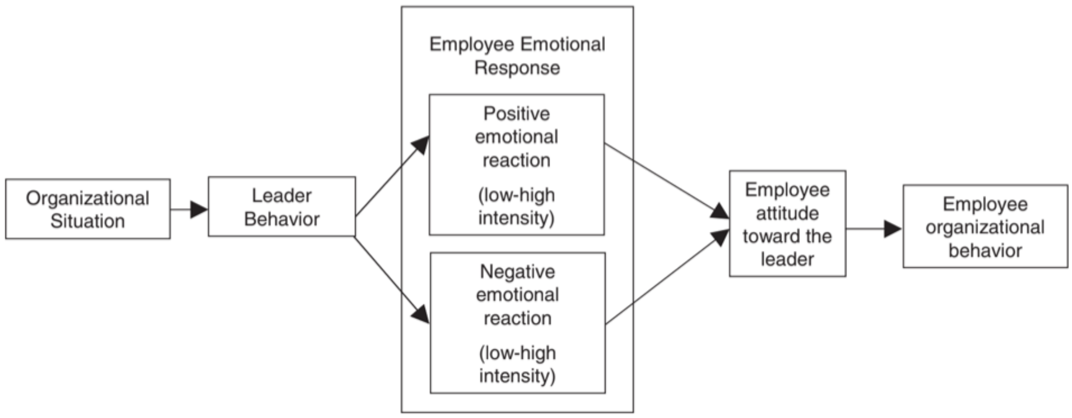

Figure 2.6: An affective events theory view of leadership behaviour and employee emotional responses (Dasborough, 2006).

2.1.4.4. Leadership – German Concept

As Germany is the context for the study, the leadership from a German perspective is discussed.

In Germany, poverty is marginal, and people live nicely. Small and medium-sized businesses account for a large portion of Germany's strength (Simon, 1996; BWWI, 2021). Despite the fact that SMEs' managers frequently complain that the government is not assisting them, they have shown to be remarkably resilient even in difficult circumstances. The answer rests in plain labour, effectiveness, attentiveness and accuracy, and adherence to high expectations (Adler, 2002).

A literal translation of the phrase leader into German is the word "Führer", and it is insufficient. Since, in German language, it is connected with Hitler's dictatorship during WW II, the word Führer has an extremely negative connotation in German-speaking nations and across the world. Surprisingly, many German phrases used in business now include Führung ("leadership", the disassociated equivalent of Führer) and have a positive connotation. As an example, Führungskraft (a leader), Führungsposition (leadership position).

According to Brodbeck and Frese (2007), in Germany, charismatic leadership is the most favourable style of leadership because it combines the qualities of honesty, inspiration, performance orientation, vision, administrative competence, and team cohesion (Bass, 1985). Germans have their own vision of charismatic leadership, which incorporates administrative competence and team-integrative behaviours. As Martin et al. (2004) pointed out, the significance of these attributes is linked to Gurowitz's (1998) statement of a continuing presence of ideals such as power and rank throughout German culture that are incompatible with modern Anglo-American leadership principles that focus on inspiring people via an attractive vision. Another reason for the administrative and team-oriented approach of charismatic leadership in Germany may be found in Stewart et al.'s (1994) argument that, in comparison to its British and American equivalents, German management downplays the leader's effect. This might be owing to the historically unfavourable overtones associated with the notion of Führer. As a result, there is a distinct lack of highly charismatic corporate executives in modern Germany. Swatch creator Nicholas Hayek stated it succinctly:

> *"We have too many managers, in other words, people who can conduct a good orchestra and play Mozart or Beethoven clinically and without emotion. However, we no longer have any Mozart's or Beethoven's"* (Gurowitz, 1998, p. 133).

In Germany, there appears to be a perpetual worry and mistrust "that a visionary leader may turn out to be a dark charismatic" (Gurowitz, 1998, p. 134).

The other and equally favourably evaluated, leadership style is characterized by collaborative orientation, modesty, and a humanistic orientation as essential characteristics. Although this kind is not as well-liked as the charismatic leader, it is certainly desired in Germany (Gurowitz, 1998). This type of leader encourages participation and collaboration in organizations. According to Aggestam and Hyde-Price (2020), German leadership must be viewed in the light of emerging new, different forms of interaction.

2.1.5. Communication

Internal communication is the managed communication system of a firm, where workers are viewed as *an internal public or stakeholder group* (Vercic et al., 2012). The process of establishing, understanding, and negotiating meaning is referred to as communication. Forms of communication include spoken, non-verbal, and written communication. It might be auditory, visual, or even bodily. Although communication can take many forms, it is always a **taught behaviour (**Vercic et al., 2012).

Relational signals are encoded "in both verbal and non-verbal communication, therefore communication is critical in defining our relationships with others" (Burgoon et al., 1984). Relational messages, according to Burgoon et al. (1984), might be interpreted as both significant issues for relational communication and dimensions along which partners understand and describe their interpersonal interactions. Burgoon et al. (1984) developed a scale to assess the essential concepts of dominance and intimacy in relationship communication. Intimacy consists of the quality's affection/involvement, similarity/depth, and receptivity/trust, whereas dominance consists of the dimensions influence, conversational control, poise, panache, and self-assurance (Burgoon and Dunbar, 2000). These relational signals provide a framework for not just evaluating communication encounters, but also directing future behaviour choices within a given bond (Burgoon et al., 1984). Simply defined, communication is the conveyance of information or a message from one person to another or to a group. Effective leadership communication, according to Luthra and Dahiya (2015), comprises conveying messages while keeping the recipient's knowledge and ability in mind, as well as guaranteeing that the receiver will be able to identify the true meaning of the message or information conveyed to him. Effective leaders must ensure that there is no confusion or misunderstanding when communicating. Although all competent leaders aim to keep the listener's point of view in mind when communicating in a group, it is still challenging to have everyone grasp what a leader wants to impart. They also argued that the difficulty in communication stems from interruptions or hurdles in transmission, either by the leader or the recipient. Some barriers are as which affects good and effective communication are:

- A leader's capacity to effectively communicate with his team is constrained by a lack of plan and purpose prior to speaking with others.
- Even if a leader plans ahead of time before speaking, neglecting to consider the characteristics of the audience will result in a failed communication process.
- A leader's selection of incorrect tools and strategies for communicating with the team will operate as a barrier and limit the level of exact comprehension of the communication done.
- One of the most significant barriers to effective leader communication is the use of the incorrect language as a communication channel.
- Another issue that contributes to inefficient leader communication is a lack of confidence in one another.
- By neglecting the listener's emotions and sensitivities, incorrect assumptions about the listener turn dialogue into misunderstanding.
- The use of signs, postures, and gestures that contradict the words used during conversation.
- Ignoring the notion of feedback while communicating is also an obstacle.

- Lack of self-confidence, ethics, integrity, and expertise is also a barrier to effective communication.
- A leader's inability to communicate effectively is exacerbated by a lack of major leadership attributes.
- Another key obstacle is the failure to adapt to changes (Luthra and Dahiya, 2015).

In general, anyone may be a leader, since everyone who takes responsibility is a leader. These individuals possess many leadership qualities, yet they cannot lead if they are unable to communicate effectively. They are able to express what they have and what they expect from others. As a consequence, effective communication is what enables leaders to lead effectively (Barrett, 2006).

2.1.5.1. Leadership Communication

Brent and Gigliotti (2017) stated that leadership communication can be divided into three groups:

1. Classical Linear Model

According to this viewpoint, if a leader wants to achieve a certain goal or send a specific message, he or she develops and transmits the message, and the process seems to be very linear and predictable. This point of view represents a one-way, cause-and-effect understanding of the communication and influence process. A failure in communication, according to certain leadership theories, can lead to a failure in leadership. While the terms “transmission”, “exchange”, or “sharing of information” are commonly used to describe communication, they oversimplify and obscure certain essential parts of the process, leading to an imperfect understanding of the dynamics involved with social impact.

2. Interactional Model

An interactional approach, as opposed to a linear model, aims "to capture more of the complexity and two-way effect between a sender and receiver" (Ruben, 2003). The interactional approach recognizes that communication is a two-way street, yet it is best understood effectively as "a multidirectional phenomenon with no distinguishable beginning or end" (Ruben, 2003).

3. System Model

A systems' perspective on communication overcomes many of the shortcomings of prior models and better reflects the complexities of leadership communication and social impact. This communication viewpoint focuses on how people develop, communicate, select, and interpret the messages that inform and shape their lives, seeing communication as a fundamental living activity rather than an exchange of information or meaning between people (Ruben and Stewart, 2016).

According to Brent and Gigliotti (2017, p. 472), an understanding of these models of leadership communication extends the "limiting view of communication as simply a mechanism, tool, or strategy to be used by leaders", replacing it with a concept that defines communication as the foundation for leadership. Authors also stated that most significantly, this systems approach to communication provides a drastically different viewpoint than other approaches on the amount to which a leader may effectively respond, foreseeable, and controlled effect on employees. Leadership and influence results are recognized to be the result of a complex combination of circumstances, including the interaction "between the leader(s), follower(s), message(s), and context(s)", as well as the interpretative actions of those engaged. The same authors also argued that from a system viewpoint, employees play an important part in making leadership functioning and that it is determined as much as by employees as by leaders.

Therefore, considering that the leaders and employees' relationship is very important, it is showing that in times of crisis, it can only be as much as important or even more important to have a leader who is using system approach, then the leader who is not using those.

2.2.6. Preferred Leadership Behaviours in Germany

Littrell and Valentin (2005) conducted an exploratory study on desired leadership behaviours and concluded that German employees prefer a work environment in which:

- Workers, supervisors, and managers are chosen based on technical skill and then left alone to execute their jobs, with extensive preparation but minimal management direction or supervision once the plan is in place;
- The most desired leader behaviour is harmonizing opposing demands and eliminating system disruption ("imposing Ordnung"); and
- The leader should not allow ambiguity and delay, but rather show concern in these instances and work to bring the system back on track ("to impose Ordnung").

The followers of English leaders appeared to prefer a more dominant attitude. The leader:

- Must clearly identify his/her tasks and communicate to followers what is expected of them;
- Should have strong beliefs in what he/she is doing and utilize encouragement and argumentation successfully in managing and encouraging employees; and
- Rather than delegating leadership to others in the organization, the leader should actively exercise it.

Any needed transformation and adaptation to a market economy may be significantly jeopardized unless leaders build market-oriented organizational cultures. Change in organizational culture is a necessary requirement for effective adaptation to external environment change, requiring the management leader to match the expectations of the organization's members. As a result, organizational leaders must be aware of and comprehend the ideal leader behaviours expected of them by their subordinates, peers, and superiors (Littrell and Valentin, 2005).

According to Jackson (1995) and Dowie et al. (2018), the expanding activities of international business are influencing multinational corporations to extend their operations. As a result, managers all over the world are involved in international activities to some extent, which requires them to develop the skills required for effective cross-cultural interactions and daily operations in foreign subsidiaries, because management must consider the nature of host culture and its relationship to management style.

In Germany, charismatic leadership is frequently seen with cynicism as an "overstated American phenomena that is difficult to transmit". One source of worry is that the acceptability of transformational leaders is linked to a more individualistic culture that ignores larger organizational and contextual factors. The danger of reverting to basic heroic "great-man" notions is underlined in accordance with this critical approach. The conversation focused on the negative repercussions of charismatic leadership, such as blind loyalty and addiction, as well as hazards resulting from political and religious contexts (Schoeller, 2020).

While this criticism should not be disregarded, a more solid empirical foundation is necessary to assess both the benefits and risks of transformational leadership for future leaders. Few studies, however, have looked at the role of transformational or charismatic leadership in German organizations, as well as the impact of these characteristics on subordinates' behaviour and attitudes such as commitment, satisfaction, and OCB - Organizational Citizenship Behaviour (Felfe et al., 2004).

There is considerable evidence that transformational leadership is not only valued by followers (satisfaction with the leader), but it also has a favourable impact on attitudes toward the company and to work. Furthermore, there is a clear influence on several performance measures. Subordinates who believe their leaders are more transformative are more inclined to engage in OCB and other activities. According to the findings, transformative leaders are also thought to be efficient and successful in their jobs. Furthermore, transformational leadership is associated with unfavourable consequences as absenteeism, as well as feelings of tension and anger. Whether transformational leadership augments the impacts of other leadership styles is critical to the concept's applicability. The so-called "augmentation effect" could, in fact, be recreated using German data. It might be demonstrated, for example, that transformational leadership strengthens the impact of transactional leadership in terms of organizational commitment, OCB, and so on (Felfe et al., 2004).

2.2. Conceptual framework

A Conceptual framework is constructed to describe the critical literature evaluation for this research (See Figure 2.7). This framework is based on the theories of leadership, pre-crisis planning and crisis management. The leadership aspect involves the differences between SMEs and large organizations, particularly insofar as the leader's influence over his/her employees (Mihai, 2015). Next, the theory of pre-crisis planning suggests a four-field crisis typology to clarify numerous sorts of crises (Heide and Simonsson, 2019). The classification consists of two separate factors, namely suddenly occurring versus slowly emerging crisis and external versus internal origin (Chapter 2.1.2.2.). Finally, Pearson and Claire's (1998) theory of crisis management suggests that rapid and effective responses are required for the organization to survive and grow. Pre-crisis planning impacts on crisis management, crisis management on leadership, and all three constructs feed into the proposed internal crisis communication model. Also, both crisis management and pre-crisis planning influence leadership, as they are affecting the decisions of a leader.

Porfiriev (1996) stated that crises are "*dynamic and chaotic processes*". Starting with types of crises, that according to Heide and Simonsson (2019) can be divided into sudden and emergent, and based on origin to external and internal. Having that in mind, a different set of effective responses can be used to maximize a company's resilience. These combined have an impact on Crisis Management, which initially has a role to play in preventing a crisis from occurring and then in mitigating the effects of a crisis that has already, inevitably, occurred. What was then observed is that crisis management itself has a role to play in leadership, as does pre-crisis planning. Both give owners and managers a sense of security and in addition help organizations to react more prompt in making decisions. Then, when the company's leadership is strong enough, and considering that SME owners/managers have a greater influence on internal communication than employees (especially in times of crisis), the goal is to get an internal model for communication in times of SME crisis, which would be an ongoing process between managers and colleagues before, during and after a possible crisis.

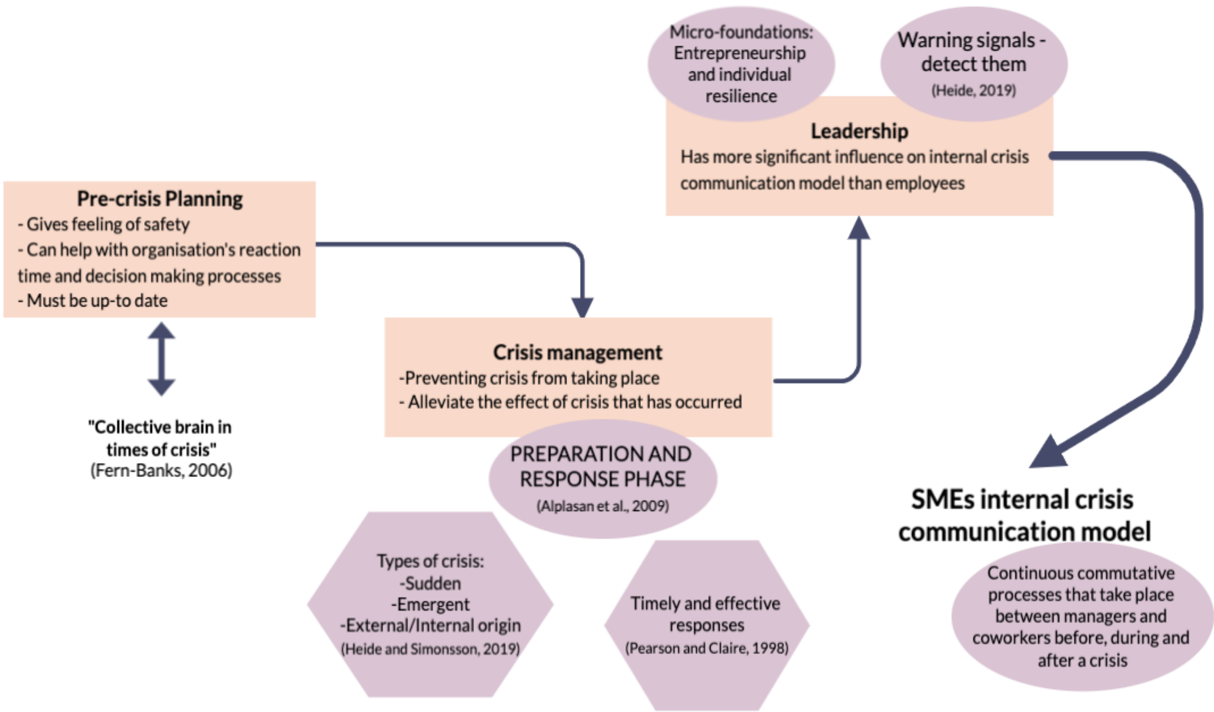

Figure 2.7: Conceptual framework of Crisis Management in SMEs (as an example)

(Source: Author’s own)

3. Research Design

This chapter outlines the pertinent study design parameters, including the philosophical research viewpoint and the precise research technique chosen to answer the research question and the research aims. It also contains a brief examination of the implications of various research philosophies and procedures. The chapter also discusses limits and ethical concerns.

3.1. Introduction

After determining the study objectives and research questions, the goal of Chapter 3 is discussing the methods used to analyse, evaluate and collect data on the impact of crisis management and pre-crisis preparation on leadership and internal organizational communication in SMEs during times of crisis.

3.1.1. Research Design and Approach

Because this research focuses on the impact of crisis management and pre-crisis planning in SMEs, which has not previously been studied, the study is exploratory in character. Sekaran (1992) argued that then we don't know much about the scenario at hand, or when we don't know how previous issues or studies have been addressed, we do an **exploratory study** - lengthy interviews with many individuals may be required to gain a hold on the situation.

Exploratory study is conducted to get a better knowledge of a subject or to explain concerns, and it serves three basic tenacities: i) assessing a condition; ii) evaluating options; iii) generating new concepts. According to Zikmund (2003), exploratory research is often performed with the intention that more study will be conducted to offer definitive confirmation of the phenomena, and it is largely qualitative in nature.

In this chapter, the four scientific research paradigms were reviewed and analysed. Furthermore, it is argued why constructivism was the optimal research paradigm to apply for this study. Besides, qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methodologies research strategies are investigated, and it was explained why qualitative research methodology, using semi-structured interviews as the data gathering tool, was best suited for this study.

The research design is depicted in Figure 3.1 below

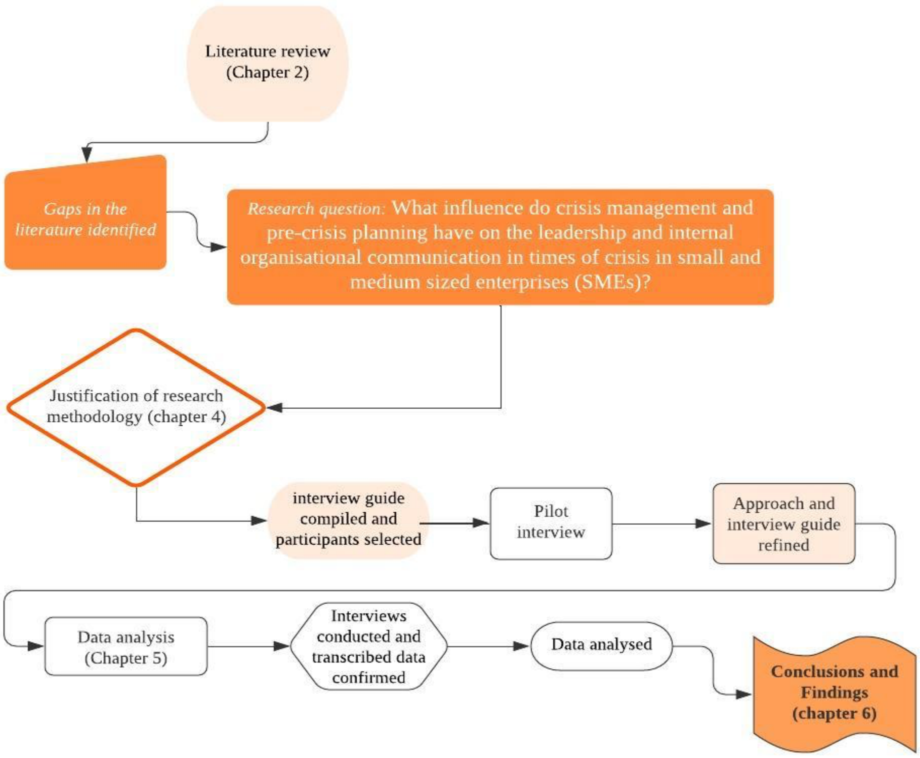

Figure 3.1: Research design (Source: Author's own).

3.2. Justification of Research Paradigm

This part describes research paradigms while investigating important research paradigms. The relationships between paradigms and qualitative and quantitative methods are studied. For this inquiry, the constructivism paradigm is supported as being suitable. The constructivism paradigm is justified as being applicable for this thesis.

3.2.1. Introduction

The selection of an acceptable paradigm by which to conduct the study is a vital stage in the process. A paradigm, or "world-view," is a conceptual framework consisting of a fundamental a collection of ideas or assumptions used as a guide for the researcher (Creswell, 2003), offering a synthesis of what the researcher believes about something, but he/she is not able to verify (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

There were numerous points of view while researching the research paradigms and procedures in the literature. (Creswell, 2003; Sarantakos, 1998). Much discussion centred on the variety of research paradigms that evolved, as well as whether the terms paradigm and methodology were interchangeable. What was apparent, however, was that when it comes to picking an acceptable study technique, researchers had several options (Creswell, 2003).

Qualitative research portrays "life-worlds from the inside out", through the perspectives of those who take part. It hopes to contribute to a better understanding of social reality by drawing attention to processes, meaning patterns, and structural aspects. Those remain closed to non-participants, but they are also, on the whole, "unconsciously known by actors caught up in their unchallenged daily routine" (Flick, von Kardorff and Steinke, 2004).

The chapter that follows discusses and substantiates the philosophical position and methodological techniques used in this thesis to achieve the proper research goal. In summary, various criteria must be examined and prioritized while establishing a study design.

Cresswell (2008) depicts a research framework based on Crotty's concepts (1998). These comprise three factors pertinent to the creation of a research question. These components for a systematic study of a certain topic of study or area govern the choice of research technique, from philosophical assumptions brought to the study through data collecting and analytic methodologies.

According to Easterby-Smith et al. (2002), philosophical issues influence the entire study design, which influences (what are satisfactory) research outputs. Researchers must be able to relate to their topic or object of research in order to contribute to current knowledge, practice, or both. As a result, the starting point for each researcher is that he or she must cope with the ramifications of research paradigms, as the researcher's philosophical perspective underpins the study design choices.

A paradigm can be defined as a systematic set of beliefs and their accompanying methods (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) that either give us some evaluation about the nature of reality or a reason why we must be satisfied with knowing something less than the nature of reality, as well as a method for grasping whatever can be grasped (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The concept of paradigm is inextricably linked to research as an epistemological stance concerned with the nature of knowledge and the process through which it is created.

Paradigms are the underlying assumptions, beliefs, processes, and norms that guide the researcher's thinking and behaviour. In this way, the researcher's personal values impact the philosophical stance that the researcher chooses, which informs the practical judgments about research strategy and research methodology that the researcher must make.

Easterby-Smith et al. (2002) provide arguments for the need of philosophical comprehension: For instance, it clarifies the research design. This involves thinking about what evidence is needed, how it will be obtained and processed, and how it will offer an answer to the research issue under consideration. Second, this philosophical comprehension can assist the researcher in deciding between alternative schemes and determining which ones will work and which will not. This assists the researcher in understanding the limitations of a certain technique. Third, understanding of philosophy can assist the researcher in creating designs with which he or she is unfamiliar. This will aid in the adaptation of research designs to the restrictions of various disciplines or knowledge architectures.

3.2.2. Research Paradigm

The positivist paradigm holds that the social world exists outside the mind and that its qualities should be assessed objectively rather than inferred subjectively through feeling, reflection, or intuition (Easterby-Smith et al., 2002). Positivism is a strategy in which the researcher adopts the role of an objective analyst and "...works with an observable social reality, with the final result being law-like generalizations comparable to those generated by physical and natural scientists" (Remenyi et al., 1998). Researchers driven by the positivist paradigm will almost certainly propose hypotheses based on an existing theory, which will then be verified and confirmed, in whole or in part, or rejected, resulting in future theory development (Saunders et al., 2007). Positivists frequently collect quantitative data and use statistical analysis to generalize findings by distilling the phenomena down to its most basic components.

For three reasons, the positivist research paradigm was not deemed adequate for conducting this research. First, the tiny number of participants did not lend themselves to quantitative study. Second, because this research is exploratory in character, it is not well adapted to quantification (Creswell, 2003). Third, study topic is not framed in terms of hypothesis validation.

Realists, on the other side, feel that it isn't possible for scholars not to use "discretionary judgment" when conducting study and that it is difficult to show causation with confidence when describing social events. Realists recognize that all research techniques are intrinsically flawed, and hence feel that generating and testing theory requires "a combination of qualitative and quantitative research approaches" (Patton, 2002).

This research technique is predominantly quantitative, but qualitative components like as case studies and convergent interviews may be included. Realist research will incorporate major components of triangulation of many perspectives of reality to get an understanding of the phenomena because of acknowledged inherent flaws in any study approach (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). According to Perry et al. (1999), this form of research seeks, though imperfectly, an awareness of the shared reality of an economic system in which many people operate autonomously.

Considering that the nature of this study was exploratory and utilized to qualitative technique, which is a crucial methodology in addition to quantitative; and this study was endeavouring to understand the behaviour of owners/managers of SMEs during times of crisis, realism was deemed an appropriate paradigm for this research.

Nevertheless, because of the number of participants in this research (only 13 SME owners/managers), this research cannot be considered quantitative and, therefore, this research cannot fall into the category of realism paradigm.

The investigation's purpose is to criticize and reform the social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic, and gender institutions that constrain and exploit individuals via confrontation, even conflict, in accordance with the critical theory paradigm (Guba and Lincoln 1994). Critical theory research studies, according to Perry et al. (1999), "*are frequently protracted exploratory and historical investigations of organizational structures and processes*".

Because this was not a long-term or historical examination of structures, and according to Guba and Lincoln (1994), the researcher did not assume the stance of a transformational intellectual who has enlarged awareness and is therefore in a position to face ignorance and misunderstandings, critical theory was not regarded viable to perform this research.

Naturalistic enquiry was another term for constructivism in the literature (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) and constructivism stood out from other research paradigms. In other words, constructivism "has evolved from ontological realism to ontological relativism" (Creswell, 2003). In the other words, constructivists seek to understand the world. Thus, they form a meaning focused on an object or thing, based on their experiences. Those meanings are diverse, prompting the researcher to hunt for the complexities of perspectives instead of condensing meanings into a few categories or ideas. The purpose of research is to depend to the greatest extent feasible on the perspectives of the interviewees on the issue that is examined. Researchers in constructivism, according to Creswell (2003), know that their background influences their interpretation, so they should examine the extent to which their interpretation is influenced by their personal experiences.

Constructivist researchers are mainly concerned with the viewpoints of participants on a certain issue and will, hence, seek answers to broad or open-ended inquiries. Thus, this enables individuals to “create” a situation's meaning. According to Creswell (2003), the researcher's goal, then, is to make sense of other people’s interpretations of the world. According to Easterby-Smith et al. (2002), the purpose of social scientists is not to collect data and measure how frequently particular patterns occur, but to try to understand and explain why individuals impose various constructions and meanings on their experiences. The social-constructivist viewpoint is frequently connected with “qualitative” research (Creswell, 2008).

3.2.3. Conclusion

The aim of the segment was to evaluate the four scientific research paradigms, as well as to choose and defend the best paradigm for this research.

While the post positivism (or realism) research paradigm was examined as a feasible technique for this study, it did not allow for a complete analysis of the respondents’ viewpoints on the research problem.

This was endorsed by constructivism, and constructivism was thus chosen as the best research paradigm for this study. This research is exploratory in character and seeks viewpoints from a very modest group, where, consequently, it is ideally suited to the constructivism paradigm's qualitative methodological approach. The study sought complicated perspectives and reactions from participants on the performance of a complex business activity, leadership, and crisis management in their own organizations. Finally, due to the researcher's background as an owner/manager of SME, she is classified as a devoted participant in the world under investigation (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). Hence, in order to conduct this research successfully, constructivism was considered the most appropriate paradigm.

3.3. Methodology of Research Justification

After the constructivism was chosen as the most suitable paradigm for this study, it was essential to select an appropriate methodology as well.

There are two types of research methodologies: "quantitative" and "qualitative" (Choy, 2014). Patton (1987) evaluated the respective strengths of data collected from these two methodologies, concluding that although quantitative data provided "a wide generalizable set of conclusions concerning vast data populations", qualitative data produced "detailed data about a considerably smaller number of persons and instances".

Historically, researchers have tended towards qualitative or quantitative, and there has been considerable discussion over whether methodology is the best. Tashakkori and Creswell (2007) observed that many researchers supported the unsuitability concept "It contends that qualitative and quantitative research paradigms should not be combined". Lincoln (1990) highlighted the passion intensity on this topic by warning that “accommodation between paradigms is impossible... we are led to vastly diverse, disparate and totally antithetical ends”.

Yet not all scholars agreed on the significance of splitting the two study approaches. One researcher claimed that whether researchers employed numbers (quantitative) or words (qualitative) in their study was insignificant. Adding that by distinguishing among quantitative and qualitative approaches, mislead is created, diverting attention away from the true issue, which is the selection of research methods and procedures that enhance access and validity (Gummerson, 2003). Furthermore, certain literature supported using mixed methods approach by combining quantitative and qualitative research methodologies (Creswell, 2003; Hanson et al., 2005).

This section’s aim is to go through each of the three research methodologies and to explain why the qualitative technique was deemed most suitable for this study. Therefore, Table 3.1 summarizes research methodologies before mentioned: quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods, as well as the philosophical assumptions that each technique is based on, as well as their research plans, procedures, and practices.

Tend to or typically	Quantitative	Qualitative	Mixed methods
Use these philosophical assumptions	• Postpositivist knowledge claims	• Constructivist/advocacy/ participatory knowledge claims	• Pragmatic knowledge claims
Employ these strategies of inquiry	• Surveys and experiments	• Phenomenology, grounded theory, case study, and narrative	• Sequential, concurrent, and transformative
Employ these methods	• Closed-ended questions, predetermined approaches, numeric data	• Open-ended questions, emerging approaches, text or image data	• Both open and closed ended questions, both emerging and predetermined approaches, and both quantitative and qualitative data and analysis
Use these practices of research, as the researcher	• Tests or verifies theories or explanations • Identifies variables to study • Relates variables in questions or hypotheses • Uses standards of validity and reliability • Observes and measures information numerically • Uses unbiased approaches • Employs statistical procedures	• Positions him/herself • Collects participant meanings • Focuses on a single concept or phenomenon • Brings personal values to the study • Studies the context or setting of the participants • Validates the accuracy of findings • Makes interpretations of the data • Creates an agenda for change or reform • Collaborates with the participants	• Collects both quantitative and qualitative data • Develops a rationale for mixing • Integrates the data at different stages of inquiry • Presents visual pictures of the procedures in the study • Employs the practices of both qualitative and quantitative research

Table 3.1: Research Methodologies (Source: Creswell, 2009)

3.3.1. Approach of this Research – Qualitative research

The qualitative approach distinguished itself from quantitative research by its scope and depth, encompassing a diverse range “of epistemological perspectives” and Conceptual frameworks comprised of several diverse research methodologies, allowing researchers to pose questions that differed from those asked by quantitative scholars (Hesse-Biber et al., 2004). The most suitable approach for the constructivist paradigm is qualitative approach (Perry and Cavaye, 2002).

The literature provided a wide range of perspectives on qualitative research. Although Leedy and Ormrod (2001) acknowledged the wide diversity of qualitative study procedures, they concluded that qualitative methodologies have two characteristics: first, they concentrate on real-world occurrences, and second, they investigate these phenomena in all of their complexities. Silverman (1998) emphasized the “real world” element of qualitative research, arguing that one asset of qualitative approaches is the ability to investigate actual operations in business on the spot. Dooley (1990) concurred with this evaluation, noting that qualitative research is a social science study that is based on non-quantitative field observations and analysis in non-statistical methods. Donalek (2005) provided perhaps the most comprehensive picture of qualitative research, stating that the goal of every qualitative research is to understand a particular element of human experience.

It was reiterated that qualitative study, as opposed to quantitative, focuses on spoken explanations, visuals, and descriptions of behaviour rather than statistics. In order to understand how participants, experience and interpret their own environment, qualitative research requires extensive accounts of social activities (Jackson, 1995).

Denzin and Lincoln (1998) proposed that in qualitative study, numerical evaluation can be completely avoided by defining qualitative study as having these characteristics: “an emphasis on processes and meanings” that are not carefully scrutinized or assessed in terms of quantity, amount, intensity, or frequency.

The following qualitative research approaches underlined the thorough and descriptive character of qualitative research: interviews; in-depth interviews; notes from the field; focus groups; participant observations; and public materials (Hesse-Biber, 2004). These research methodologies rely on words in order to deliver a sense of information fruitfulness that a table of numbers cannot. According to Patton (2002), qualitative data describe events that carry us into the time and location of the observation, allowing us to imagine what it was like to be there. They use words to record and transmit someone else's experience of the world. They are telling a narrative.

Ticehurst and Veal (2000) defined the qualitative approach as being more interested in obtaining a large amount of information from a few people or organizations (via qualitative data collection methods) rather than obtaining a modest quantity of information gathered from a big number of persons or organizations. Ticehurst and Veal (2000) also recognized that the qualitative method is founded on the assumption that a comprehensive grasp of a few people’s experiences and scenarios the, is more important than a narrow understanding of a large representative population, regardless of how “unrepresentative they may be”.

The features of both qualitative research and researchers were defined by Rossman and Rallis (1998) in an attempt to provide a sense of the essential qualities of qualitative research (See Table 3.2 below).

Qualitative research	Qualitative researcher
• Takes place in the natural world • Uses multiple methods that are interactive and humanistic • Is emergent rather than tightly prefigured • Is fundamentally interpretive	• Views social phenomenon holistically • Systematically reflects on who he/she is in the inquiry • Is sensitive to his/her personal biography and how it shapes the study • Uses complex reasoning that is multifaceted and iterative

Table 3.2: Qualitative research characteristics (Source: Rossman and Rallis, 1998)

Rossman and Rallis (1998) were able to provide a clear image of qualitative research by integrating the features of the research methodology and the researcher. The adjectives “humanistic, interactive, interpretative, natural world, reflective, reasoning, sensitive, and social” delivered the impression that “qualitative research is firmly rooted in the actual, social world, rather than in a laboratory”. There was a strong feeling that the researcher interacts with the participants and must thus continually pause to reflect on and calibrate his/her connection with the study subjects/participants. In contrast to quantitative technique, it is the researcher’s responsibility not to impose a tight data gathering framework on the participants. Patton (2002) suggested 3 types of qualitative data: “interviews, observations and documents”. Creswell (2003) introduced another category a year later with regards to expansion of the internet and technology: “audiovisual materials”.

Open-ended questions usually compose the interviews, designed in a way to elicit replies about experiences and feelings of the participants. Patton (2002) stated that data from the interviews consists of quotations, whereas observation data consists of notes with descriptions.

3.3.2. Mixed Methods Research

Mixed methods approach was discovered by attempting to merge both qualitative and quantitative research methods (Creswell, 2003; Hanson et al. 2005). According to Creswell (2003), the collecting or analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data in a same study, whether done concurrently or sequentially, is known as mixed methods research. Collecting is prioritized, and entail the integration of data at one or more stages of the research process.

The core idea of mixed methods research was that if a researcher knew the advantages and disadvantages of quantitative and qualitative research, he or she would be able to combine both methodologies in such a way that the respective strengths of each paradigm were maximized while the weaknesses were minimized (Rank, 2004). According to Creswell (2003), effective application of this concept is a primary source of justification for mixed methods research, since the output is preferable to mono method studies. The benefit of mixed methods research was that it was less likely to be confined by the research strategy utilized, giving the research a higher chance of expanding as "completely and totally as feasible" (Creswell, 2003).

Creswell (2003) identified issues needed to be answered to establish a strong mixed methods study approach:

1. What is the execution sequence of the intended study for collecting quantitative and qualitative data?

2. What importance would be given to the gathering and analysis of quantitative and qualitative data?

3. When will the descriptive and analytical data and findings be implemented into the study project?

4. Will the study employ a broad theoretical viewpoint (e.g., gender, race/ethnicity, lifestyle, or class)?

Mixed methods research, by definition, provides several obstacles to the researcher, who must have significant experience in both quantitative and qualitative procedures. The mixed methods approach necessitates the development of a strategy that allows for the underlying basic disparities in qualitative and quantitative techniques. Therefore, this task would need a large amount of time and effort from the scholar.

Scholars were advised by Clark and Causer (1991) to be realistic in their study methodology selection and to be mindful of what was doable given restricted interval and resources. This was refuted by Rallis and Rossmann (2003), who stated that mixed methods designs are “time-consuming to implement” and need a level of methodological understanding not often available in a single individual.

3.3.3. Conclusion

Considering that this research was conducted “in the real world”, following the constructivism paradigm, the most appropriate approach was considered to be qualitative approach. Having in mind also that constructivism is “qualitative in nature”. Qualitative approaches are ideally suitable to study involving data collection in the form of thorough descriptions pertaining to business operations, SMEs crisis management, and leadership. Furthermore, the very limited number of participants in the study made qualitative approaches more appropriate.

Quantitative research approaches were deemed unsuitable because they are unsuited to the constructivist paradigm and the circumstance in which “a great amount of richly detailed data must be obtained from a limited number of participants” (Creswell, 2003). Because it has been established that quantitative methodology is unsuitable for this study, and quantitative methodology is a crucial part of mixed methods approach, mixed methods research, therefore, was not chosen as a research technique. Furthermore, there was no evident benefit to implementing a mixed method.

Respondents were chosen based on their typical representation of important constructs (owners/managers of SMEs in Germany). This theory-based or operational construct sampling is a form of expert sampling in which particular expertise is required, and discovering and selecting individuals or groups of individuals who are exceptionally knowledgeable about or conversant with a subject of attention (Creswell and Plano-Clark, 2011).

3.4. Qualitative Interview Research Techniques

The qualities of each paradigm were considered in previous sections as well as the notion and practice of scientific research paradigms were examined, and it was determined that the constructivist research paradigm was the best fit for the aims of this research project. Following the selection of an acceptable research paradigm, the techniques available for conducting research, accomplishments were studied (section 3.3), and it was, therefore, determined that qualitative research was the best strategy for this study.

The goal of this subsection is to present and discuss interview methodologies, as well as to demonstrate what is the best data gathering strategy for this study.

3.4.1. Conducting interviews

Interviews enable the researcher to collect data on subjects that cannot be viewed directly and to collect empirical data from the social environment by interviewing individuals about themselves (Holstein and Gubrium, 2003). Interviews are ideally suitable to research circumstances requiring complicated queries yielding complex replies (Shuy, 2003). The interview approach was preferred by Marshall and Rossman (1999) because it was "a helpful technique to acquire huge volumes of data fast". Patton (2002, p. 268-269) made the justification for interviewing: *We are unable to witness feelings, ideas, or intentions. We are unable to see behaviours that occurred at an earlier moment in time. We cannot witness circumstances in which an observer is not present. We are unable to witness how humans have organized the world and the meanings they assign to what happens in the world. We need to ask individuals about these issues. The goal of interviewing is to gain access to the other person's point of view. The assumption behind qualitative interviewing is that the perspectives of others are valuable, knowable, and able to be made clear. We conduct interviews to learn what is on someone else's mind and to collect tales.*

Interviews are a data collection strategy used in qualitative study, and it may be said that "it is the most natural of all research data collecting approaches" (Creswell, 2003). As humans, we are always questioning of others and being enquired of as we go about our everyday lives.

Kahn and Cannell (1957), on the other hand, suggested qualitative interviewing is a lot more than just "asking questions" by stating that a specialized verbal pattern engagement established for a certain reason and centred on a certain subject matter, with the removal of unnecessary information as a result. Furthermore, the interview is a form of interaction process wherein the role of connection between the researcher and the responder is very specialized, with the unique characteristics of the interview dependent on the interview's aim and characteristics.

3.4.2. Types of Interviews

Patton (2002) specified qualitative interview categories: semi-structured interviews, unstructured interviews, and structured interviews.

Unstructured interviews were defined as having no limits on question phrasing and a flexible format, whereas structured interviews were commonly used in quantitative research and consisted of a formal, disciplined questionnaire given by the interviewer. On the other hand, semi-structured interviews included aspects of either unstructured and structured interviews. In quantitative research, structured interviews are utilized, whereas semi-structured interviews are suitable for both (Adhabi and Anozie, 2017).

Patton's evaluation of the qualities, assets, and drawbacks of each of the qualitative interview methodologies is shown in Table 3.3 below.

Type of interview	Characteristics	Strengths	Weaknesses
Informal conversational interview **'Unstructured'**	• questions emerge from the immediate context and are asked in the natural course of things • there is no pre-determination of question topics or wording • open-ended questions	• increases the salience and relevance of questions • interviews are built on and emerge from observations • the interview can be matched to individuals and circumstances	• different information collected from different people with different questions • less systematic and comprehensive if certain questions do not arise naturally • data organisation and analysis can be quite difficult
Interview guide approach **'Semi-structured'**	• topics and issues to be covered are specified in advance, in outline form • interviewer decides sequence and wording of questions in the course of interview • open-ended questions	• the outline increases the comprehensiveness of the data and makes data collection somewhat systematic for each respondent • logical gaps in data can be anticipated and closed • interviews remain fairly conversational and situational	• important and salient topics may be inadvertently omitted • interviewer flexibility in sequencing and wording questions can result in substantially different responses from different perspectives, thus reducing the comparability of responses
Standardised open-ended interview **'Structured'**	• the exact wording and sequence of questions are determined in advance • all interviewees are asked the same basic questions in the same order	• respondents answer the same questions, thus increasing comparability of responses • data are complete for each person on the topics addressed in the interview • reduces interviewer effects and bias when several	• little flexibility in relating the interview to particular individuals and circumstances • standardised wording of questions may constrain and limit naturalness and

Type of interview	Characteristics	Strengths	Weaknesses
	• questions are worded in a completely open-ended format	interviewers are used • permits evaluation users to see and review the instrumentation use in the evaluations • facilitates organisation and analysis of data	relevance of questions and answers

Table 3.3: Interview types (Source: Patton, 2002).

As may be seen from the Table 3.3, the form for all the qualitative interviews was open-ended. Adhabi and Anozie (2017, p. 92) agreed, stating that:

> *"…The researcher also needs to rely on open-ended questions to elucidate the appropriate response of the participant".*

Open-ended questions "do not include a set of response options", such as yes or no (Züll, 2016) and "allow the respondents to react according to their own terms and convey unique opinions" (Patton, 2002, p. 10). Stereotypically, respondents respond to open-ended inquiries with elaborate comments (Mishler, 1986). Open-ended questions have the advantage of allowing interviewees to adapt replies to his/her exact specifications, instead of having to choose between possibilities that may not be optimal for them.

Nevertheless, according to Judd et al. (1991), "open-ended inquiries have downsides". The most significant are the expense and complexity in properly categorizing the replies. They are frequently inconsistent, illogical, or unimportant.

3.4.3. Conclusion

The semi-structured interview method with open-ended questions was used for this research to guarantee that the direction of the interview was not leaded in a certain direction by a pre-determined and rigidly organized approach, and that data collection was methodical and complete. Following Creswell's (1998) suggestion, the semi-structured interviews are recorded and transcribed.

3.5. Summary of Research Methodology

Figure 3.2 depicts and emphasizes the link between the paradigms, procedures, and data gathering strategies.

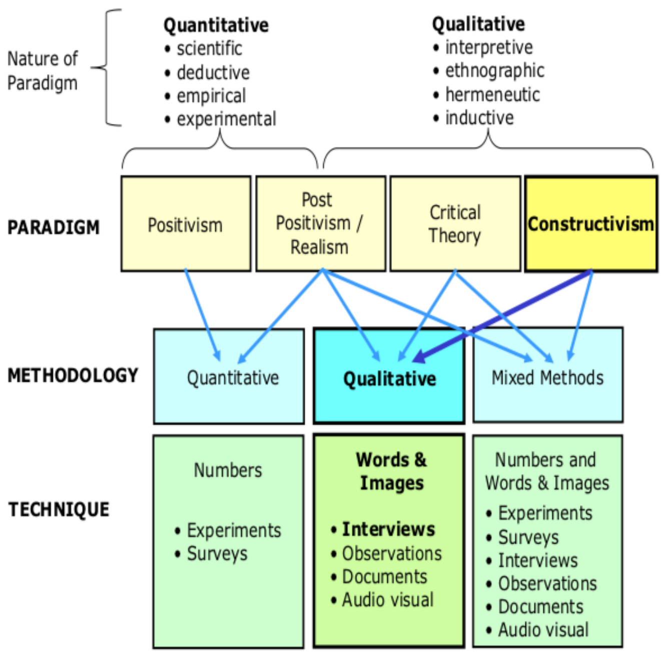

Figure 3.2: Research strategy (source: Author's own).

Each paradigm is labelled as "quantitative" or "qualitative", where key phrases describing the characteristics of quantitative and qualitative paradigms are provided. The lines in figure point to the study approach (blue) that is appropriate for each paradigm. Except for positivism, all theories have many research methodologies. Each study methodology's data gathering strategies (green) are listed below each methodology.

3.6. Interview Procedure

Creswell's (1998) systematic technique for conducting a qualitative research interview was employed to carry out this study in the following manner:

1. Participants were identified and selected – First, online research was conducted to identify potential SME owners/managers participants. The author is familiar with many companies in Germany, due to the nature of work. But she did not want to use existing contacts, considering the fact that in that way she could have been subjective (biased). Therefore, online research for potential companies was conducted and a list of around 100 possible participants was made, after which invitations were sent via email. Around 30 of them accepted the invitation, and due to the ongoing pandemic, it was not impossible and/or hard to interview someone from South-Western Germany, for example. After a list and thorough research on those companies who accepted the invitation was conducted, number of employees in each company was taken into consideration, and due to possible differences in outcome, author tried to make the list to range from 5 employees to 250. At first, 10 participants were chosen, and interviews with them were conducted, but that number of interviews was not completely enough for the data saturation Patton (2002) argued about. Therefore, one by one was added until the data saturation was achieved.

2. The interview type was determined - The semi-structured interview method with open-ended questions was used for this research to guarantee that the direction of the interview was not leaded in a certain direction by a pre-determined and rigidly organized approach, and that data collection was methodical and complete. Following Creswell's (1998) suggestion, the semi-structured interviews are recorded and transcribed (as discussed in section 3.4 of this thesis).

3. Proper recording methods were used – Having in mind the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic at the time when interviews were conducted, every interview was conducted online via Google Meet platform (as the Google Meet platform is secure, encrypted and safe), and audio recorded using the same platform. Of course, all participants were informed about the audio recording.

4. Appropriate interview guide was developed – Interview guide was developed with regard to research sub-issues (explained in detail in Chapter 4). After conducting pilot interview, two questions were added, and some questions were redeveloped (explained in Section 3.6.4)

5. The interview was scheduled in accordance with the participant's schedule.

6. The consent of the respondent was acquired.

7. The respondent was informed of the aim of the interview – See Appendix A.

Interviews are conducted by researchers to learn "the things we cannot see with our own eyes... The goal of interviewing is to get insight into respondents' point of view" (Patton, 2002, p. 7). Thus, the major goal of interviewing is to collect information about the respondents' perspectives on a certain topic. This data creates "a firm factual foundation from which inferences may be taken, interpretations can be made, and additional study can be conducted" (Arthur, 1999).

The interview technique's success is mostly determined on the interviewer's competence. According to Potter and Hepburn (2005), interviewing is a vastly qualified endeavour, and qualitative interviews, while fairly simple to conduct, are challenging to execute properly.

The interview technique, as described, was created to guarantee that respondents' opinions were adequately obtained and that those opinions were appropriately analysed in terms of the respondents' world-view rather than the researchers. According to DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006), the semi-structured interview technique was used for this study, with open-ended questions created before the interviews, and the interviews have been the only way for participants in this study to provide data. Each participant was questioned only once and the format was video online interview, which was the most similar to face-to-face interviewing, which was not possible due to the pandemic of COVID-19 virus at the moment of the interviewing participants. Considering this, conducted interviews will be considered like in person interviews.

Initially, a pilot interview with one respondent was conducted, and the results of this interview were utilized to develop the interview technique and update the interview guide. The interview guide was only used sparingly throughout the interview in order to preserve a casual and conversational relationship with the participants (Charmaz 2003). Prior to each interview, thorough preparation assured that this parsimonious use of the interview guide did not result in insufficient inquiry.

3.6.1. Interview Environment

Each interview was conducted online via video conference call (Google Meet) considering the COVID-19 pandemic in the time of conducting interviews. Many firms, for example, have policies prohibiting external visits or policies allowing employees to work from home.

Some negative repercussions of doing online interviews rather than in-person interviews include making it more difficult to become close to the responder, which Hallin and Helin (2018) support. According to Collis and Hussey (2014), it can result in shorter interviews. However, as long as the subject is content with the online interview technique, it is assumed that it does not result in shorter interviews or substantive differences when compared to in-person interviews (Hallin and Helin, 2018). According to some study, doing an interview over the phone might cause one to overlook the respondent's body language, which can influence our interpretation of the information (Alvesson, 2003). Furthermore, when it comes to addressing sensitive questions, online interviews offer significant advantages because research given by Bell et al. (2019) reveals that the interview responder may be less bothered if the questions are not asked in person and are not physically present. During the interviews, there was no evidence of discomfort from the respondents.

There are several advantages to doing online interviews. For example, it is already a widely utilized strategy that is actively assisting individuals all over the world to overcome geographical barriers. Bell et al. (2019) also affirm the benefits of online interviews, stating that they are particularly effective for engaging difficult-to-reach demographics. This was particularly useful during conducting interviews for this research when contacting responders who would have been difficult to meet in person because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Because of these advantages, internet interviews were a viable option for conducting interviews. It gives access to a greater geographical region and, according to the studies cited above, it does not have to alter the substance or duration of the interviews.

According to De Vaus (2002), when conducting interviews, special attention should be devoted to “respondent’s well-being and the creation of proper understanding with the respondents”. The capacity to build “confidence and rapport with respondents” aided in the collecting of credible data (Creswell, 2003). The interviewer should be watching for symptoms of discomfort all the time, heeding Charmaz’s (2003) warning that “their comfort should be of more concern than acquiring juicy material”. According to Allen (2017), participants were bewildered about recording the interview, because of the concern about anonymity. Because of that, special care should be taken to ensure that interviewees were comfortable with the recording.

3.6.2. Selecting Participants

Creswell (2007) addresses the significance of choosing the right people for interviews. He claims that the researcher should use one of the many types of sampling procedures, criterion-based sampling, for example, or critical case sampling, to find suitable applicants who would provide the most reliable information for the research. Creswell also highlights the need of finding individuals who are willing to provide information openly and honestly or "their narrative."

For this research, invitation emails were sent to owners/managers of the SME organizations., A list of around 100 possible participants was generated after online research on various safe websites (for example: Listflix, Xing LinkedIn etc.). After most of the owners / managers who wanted to participate in the survey responded to the email invitations to participate, a primary selection of 10 participants was made. They were chosen based on the company's size, that is the criterion for a minimum of five to a maximum of 250 employees. After the pilot interview, and later the other nine, in order to obtain additional information, following the selection of three additional individuals based on the same criteria as before, the sample size would be determined by what the researcher wanted to know and the saturation of information, according to Patton (2002).

For purposes of this research, non-probability a sampling method was used. As Tansey (2007) stated, non-probability sampling is distinguished by the fact that subjective judgements are used in sample selection, with the researcher deciding who will be included in the research as a participant. He also stated that advantages of non-probability sampling are:

- influence over the selection process
- inclusion of important actors
- particularly useful when establishing what a set of people think or when reconstructing an event and/or set of events.

On the other hand, disadvantages of this method are:

- greater scope of selection bias
- limited potential to generalize from the sample to wider population.

Considering the possible disadvantage of this sampling method, the author did everything possible to exclude being biased during the selection of participants. For example, by using an interview guide, by using standardized questions, and as well, as previously mentioned, by not using existing customers and partners as an interviewee.

3.6.3. Number of Participants

Several scholars argued about of the number of participants needed for the qualitative research, many of them (Carson, et al., 2001; DeRuyter, 1998; Perry, 2001) argued that the number of 15-40 participants is required. Patton (2002), on the other hand, stated that there are no sample size guidelines in qualitative research, and that the number of participants will vary depending on what the researcher wants to know, the aim of the investigation, what is at risk, what will be valuable, and saturation of knowledge. Lincoln and Guba (1985) advocated for conducting research until redundancy was reached. In other words, when no new information is obtained from recently sampled units, sampling is terminated. According to Patton (2002, p.5), the problem with this strategy is that it "works best for fundamental research, unbounded timescales, and unrestricted resources".

Thirteen interviews were conducted for this thesis (one of which was a pilot interview). The rationale for this little number of interviews (in comparison to the quantities mentioned above) was information saturation. As a result, the participant number is thorough and demonstrative, and it meets Patton's (2002, p. 14) "sample size requirements of utility, trustworthiness, and participant availability".

Saturation of knowledge was achieved using the application of triangulation (multiple sources of data) (Denzin, 2009, 2012). Denzin (2009) also argued that there is a clear relationship between data triangulation and data saturation; the one (data triangulation) assures the other (data saturation). Therefore, data triangulation is a technique for achieving data saturation. As soon as objectivity, truth and validity were obtained, that was when the data saturation was achieved.

3.6.4. Data Collection Process

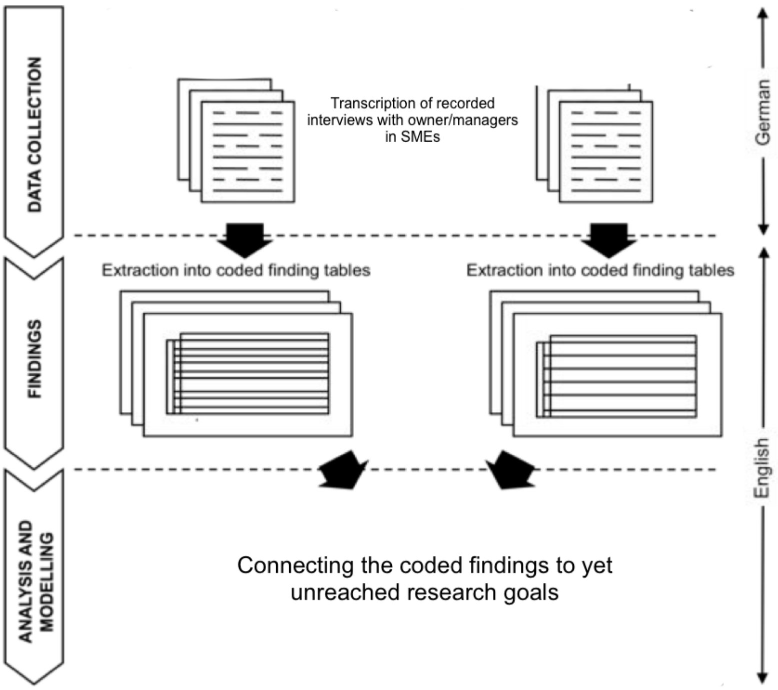

Figure 3.3: Methodology for data collection, extraction of findings, and analysis

(Source: Adopted from Havar - Simonovich, 2012)

A pilot interview was performed after generating semi-structured interview questions and choosing participants to test the interview technique and evaluate the interview guide's usefulness. The pilot interview was designed in order to test the interviewee's understanding of the interview questions (Ismail et al., 2018). The information collected during the pilot interview was used to "fine-tune" the guide.

The pilot interview was also conducted online, via video call, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The informant was issued a letter of informed consent, and the researcher obtained agreement from the informant. The interview was recorded and ranged approximately 22 minutes. The purpose of the pilot interview was to assess the suitability of the questions and to offer the researcher with some early indications of the research's potential. Furthermore, it allowed the researcher to get experience conducting in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Significantly, the pilot study assisted the researcher in polishing interviewing skills and assessing the flow of the discussion, as well as amending questions to increase clarity and/or flow of the conversation. In addition, as a result of the difficulties raised during the pilot interview, several questions were rewritten and reordered, and relevant probes were added. For example, a question that was added is "Do you think that it is easier for bigger companies to cope with the crisis and why". This question was added as the author agreed with one of the pilot participant's suggestion to consider the difference in resilience from the point of view of an owner and/or a manager of an SME company. Consequently, the interview framework was revised, and three new essential questions were added to the interview framework to allow for higher quality data and deeper replies from participants. As a result, twelve open-ended questions were incorporated in the major research to maximize the relevance of the interview questions in comprehending the participants' lived experiences. The data collection procedure is depicted in Figure 3.4.

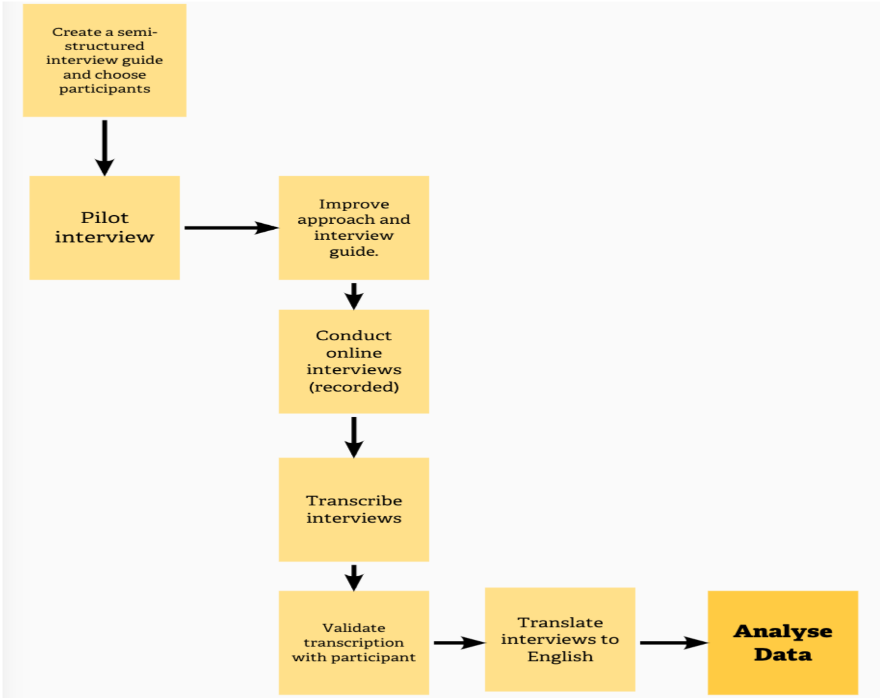

Figure 3.4: Data collection process (Source: Author's own)

According to Creswell (2013), semi structured interviews were conducted, taped, then transcribed and translated from German to English. Following the Hagens et al. (2009) advise, the transcripts were sent to the interviewees not only to maintain research ethics, but also to authenticate what was stated during the interviews and to check that the written words in the transcript corresponded to what the interviewees said. After the interviewee approval, transcribed interviews were translated from German to English and then analysed for the purpose of this research. Video recordings of the interviews were deleted after the approval of transcription was gained, to protect privacy of participants.

3.6.5. Interview Length

The average interview length was 25 minutes, with some interviews lasting longer than that, and some shorter. The longest interview was almost 60 minutes long, and the shortest one was 12 minutes long, considering that there are people who do not like to open-up (which was the case with one participant), and do not give intensive answers even after repeated follow-ups. Nevertheless, a gain in knowledge is generated from this interview as well.

3.7. Limitations and Ethical Issues

This section investigates the ethical issues raised by this study, beginning regarding general ethical principles and then addressing the framework of ethics developed to provide the best possible protection to the owners/managers who took part in this research.

3.7.1. Limitations

The research strategy has a number of limitations.

The decision to depend on in-depth interviews as a strategy comes at the expense of limited representativeness (compared to quantitative surveys). Furthermore, the purposeful exploratory research objective implies that experimentally obtained conclusions cannot serve as a trustworthy foundation for describing current phenomena or for making predictions. The empirical research stage's national and cultural orientation adds to the restrictions. Because the study is being done in Germany, the results may be influenced by local culture and national customs. While one might argue that nations in the Western world have a lot of common ground when it comes to leadership and crisis management, these ideas may have completely different perspectives and meanings in culturally distant places like the Middle East.

Further constraints, particularly those determined by the scope of the research endeavour and the nature of the obtained results, are mentioned in the concluding remarks at the end of this thesis

3.7.2. Ethical Considerations for this Research

According to Orb et al. (2000), the researcher's objective is to listen to participants' voices or observe them in their natural environments. Also, Streubert and Carpenter (1999) stated that it is hard to know in advance what the answers will be and that the relationship between researcher and participants is very important. Therefore, researcher must follow ethical guidelines and, in case of distress, stop the interview. According to Orb et al. (2000), the problems essential in qualitative research can be mitigated by understanding and use of "deep-rooted ethical concepts".

Orb et al. (2000) maintained that there were three basic principles of research ethics in the context of the researcher-research subject relationship:

1. Autonomy - According to Capron (1989), any type of study should be guided by the concepts of human dignity, beneficence, and fairness. Respect, according to him, is the acknowledgement of the interviewee's rights, such as the right to be properly informed about the study, the right to freely choose whether to engage in a study, and the ability to withdraw at any time without consequences.

2. Justice - The notion of justice relates to fairness and equitable share. One of the most important and distinguishing elements of this concept is the prohibition of exploitation and abuse of participants. According to Orb et al. (2020), justice in qualitative research studies is exhibited through acknowledging participants' vulnerabilities and contributions to the study.

3. Beneficence - making a difference in the lives of others and averting harm (Orb et al., 2000).

The research effort presented in this thesis follows the ethical guidelines outlined in Worcester University's Code of Practice on Research Ethics. The confidentiality of all questioned persons is particularly protected, and their comments are treated confidentially. All interviews are done within the terms of a signed agreement. Through her signature, the author of this thesis agrees to maintain secrecy. As a result, data collection is carried out on the basis of mutually agreed-upon and informed permission. Furthermore, respondents' potentially demanding work schedules and working circumstances are treated with care. All the data (transcribed and translated interviews) will be anonymously stored for 10 years, in accordance with Worcester University's policy, on the University's OneDrive. Also, in accordance with University of Worcester policy, the University retains ownership and control of the data and that it is securely and adequately protected.

Certain difficulties mentioned for "ethics in qualitative field research" (Babbie, 2004) do not apply to this thesis, such as paying individuals to access their thoughts, taking sides, or failing to react to severe needs.

4. Data Analysis and Discussion of Findings

4.1. The Chapter’s Objective

The purpose of this chapter is to give the results of the previously conducted interviews, as well as to analyse and discuss the findings in connection to the study topics based on the previously completed literature study.

4.1.2. Approach to Data Presentation

During the interviews, a substantial quantity of data was gathered. The first two steps of Miles and Huberman’s (1994) techniques were used to present the interview data in this chapter:

i) **data compression:** The researcher generalized replies to interview questions and then gave representative response samples. In situations when there were several replies, each viewpoint was represented. Response samples were supplied in the form of expanded text; and

ii) **data presentation:** the replies to each interview question were then organized and compared to previously conducted literature review.

Each topic is broken into research sub-issues and comprises a portion of this chapter. To facilitate data collection at the research problem level, participants were asked questions at the research sub-issue level. This information served as the foundation for answering the research challenge (Emory and Cooper 1991). Considering that conceptual framework (Figure 2.7) of this thesis consist of three main concepts – pre-crisis planning, leadership and crisis management; where during the literature review it was found that employee's behaviour has a significant impact on Leadership, and that all combined makes viable internal crisis communication, these themes are derived as a sub-issues and examined that way. Those concepts were considering the most important to be examined during interviews, as it is explained in the literature review, as well as from the personal experience of the author.

Thematic analysis was used for the data analysis. Thematic analysis (TA) can be defined as a method of identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns of meaning in qualitative data (Castleberry and Nolen, 2018; Clarke et al., 2015). According to Clarke et al. (2015) rather than a methodology, TA offers a tool or technique which is unbounded by theoretical commitments and therefore unusual in the collection of qualitative analytic approaches. As a descriptive method, TA reduces the data in a flexible way (Castleberry and Nolen, 2018) and provides the qualitative researcher greater flexibility (Clarke et al., 2015). However, to uphold transparency of the method to ensure confidence in the findings, Castleberry and Nolen (2018) caution that TA should be undertaken with special care and attention.

There are inductive and deductive approaches to TA (Kiger and Varpio, 2020). An inductive approach is where the data determine the themes, whereas with a deductive approach, the researcher arrives at the data with some preconceived themes based on theory or existing knowledge (Kiger and Varpio, 2020). In this study, the theoretical framework provided a strong idea of what themes were expected to emanate from the data, hence the deductive approach to TA.

Coding can be done at the semantic or the latent level of meaning, that is the semantic or obvious meanings in the data can be reported, or the latent meanings such as the ideas and assumptions behind what is stated can be interrogated (Braun and Clarke, 2012). This study uses both semantic and latent meanings in the analysis of the data. According to Kleinheksel et al. (2020), the most common definition of latent content analysis is deciphering what is concealed deep inside the text. The researcher's job in this approach is to identify the implied meaning in the experiences of the participants. Latent analysis was used in this research as a form of research sub-issues (themes). This way, a hybrid of deductive and inductive analysis was used (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

The themes extracted from reviewing the literature were used to classify and review the data in a deductive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2012). The themes were identified, transcripts read, and extracts relevant to the themes highlighted (Braun and Clarke, 2012). Next the author coded extracts for each theme and summarized these into one or two sentences which were then reviewed to ensure that they fit with the overall theme and the influence domain (Srinivasan et al., 2022). According to Byrne (2022), a researcher who uses a deductive or "theory-driven" method may want to develop codes based on a pre-specified conceptual framework or codebook. In this situation, the analysis would be 'analyst-driven,' based on the researcher's theoretically informed interpretation. The author (Byrne, 2022) also stated that inductive or deductive techniques of analysis are not entirely or inherently related to a specific epistemology.

4.1.3. Quality Criteria

The necessity of trustworthiness is regarded to assure the quality of the data by emphasizing on transferability, reliability, conformability, and credibility (Bell et al. 2019). Qualitative research, as in this example, may go further into a subject (Bell et al. 2019). To ensure the transferability of results in this thesis, the author intended to write what Bell et al. (2019) refer to as a "thick description", or a "detailed narrative". It is also critical to deal with data selection, suitable data analysis, and plainly exhibit the findings in order for the results to be relevant when looking at comparable circumstances. Working toward this goal, the author ensured that the outcome was applicable to samples and transportable. The author argues that because of the identical difficulties revealed in this thesis, such as comparable effects of the global crisis and similarities in the SMEs, the outcome may be transferrable to other SMEs in Europe to some extent.

Efforts have also been taken to assure the thesis' trustworthiness. According to Guba and Lincoln (1994), dependability is the "qualitative counterpart of reliability in quantitative research". In qualitative research, dependability entails an auditing strategy, which includes maintaining study material, being clear about how findings are reached, and allowing others to understand how data has been managed and judgments have been made. By showing data and analytical methodologies, the author feels she was successful with this approach.

Nevertheless, Bell et al. (2019) stated that it is hard to be completely impartial in professional research; with this in mind, the author wanted to focus on making more rational decisions and analyses. In accordance with this, she made an effort to reduce the influence of personal values on the material.

The author also dealt with conformability in the thesis, which is defined as the extent to which the conclusions of the research might be validated by other researchers. Conformability is concerned with establishing that facts and interpretations of results are not figments of the inquirer's imagination, but are clearly derived from evidence. (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) and credibility – "Credibility is the belief in the veracity of the research results”. The credibility of the study findings determines if they reflect plausible information drawn from the participants’ original data and are an accurate interpretation of the participants' original thoughts (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). By clearly detailing how the study is done and organized, conformability may be achieved. The author hopes that by describing this in depth to the reader and being open and transparent, the reader will be able to authenticate and corroborate the conclusions of this research to a greater extent. In terms of believability, the author strove for her material to be credible and suitable. This was accomplished by being genuine with findings and relying on trusted sources such as the university library and established university search engines. The data analysis approach followed the guidelines offered by Braun and Clarke (2006), with the awareness that it is a cyclical process with back-and-forth movement across the stages that changes with time. In this study, the researcher purposely became familiar with the data during interviews, again during transcription and during the iterative process of cross-checking data with literature, research aims and objectives, and with data previously collected during this primary research stage. At an early stage of data analysis, several themes emerged from the interviews. As part of the semi-structured interview process, conversation frequently occurred that looked to have little link to the topics posed yet predictably ‘wandered off’ into related parts of the issue (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The emerging themes were drawn from the data (Patton, 1990), but in a broader sense than expected.

4.2. Analysis of the Research Issues

The overview of the findings is given. Firstly, the table that summarizes the interviewed participants is presented. After that, the findings are presented along the four crisis types domains: Pre-crisis planning, internal crisis communication, leadership, resilience in SMEs and bigger companies, and **employee** behaviour in times of crisis.

During the interviews, a triangulation method was used to validate the data – as the mutual validation of data produced using several approaches (Fielding and Schreier, 2001).

Considering that this research was conducted anonymously, i.e., that participant's personal information was anonymized after conducting interviews, while transcribing them, in the Table 4.1. essential information about the participants is provided (such as gender, number of employees in the company, years of experience and industry focus).

Respondent number	Gender	Number of employees	Years of experience	Industry focus
1	M	30	30	Mechanical and plant engineering
2	M	100	20	Mechanical and plant engineering
3	M	40	10	Plant engineering
4	M	20	25	Model and mold making
5	F	250	1	Plant engineering
6	M	21	30	Laser technology precision prototypes and sample construction
7	M	35	5	Metal processing
8	M	35	3	Welding technology
9	M	168	2	Plant engineering
10	M	26	4	Beam welding technology
11	M	50	25	Large-scale plant engineering
12	M	5	30	Business advertising
13	M	173	40	Large-scale printing

Table 4.1: Participant information (Source: Author's own)

4.2.1. Pre-crisis Planning

The proactive identification and mitigation of vulnerabilities in order to avoid or decrease the impact of crises is referred to as crisis planning. It focuses on the activities that must be completed before a crisis develops (Hough and Spillan, 2005).

Research sub-issue: Obviously in 2020 during COVID-19 pandemic many companies have been in a crisis situation, but can you think of a crisis your company has faced before this current crisis and did you have some sort of plan before that crisis to help you manage it?

There was general agreement among participants on the importance of defining what pre-crisis preparedness is and how crucial it is. However, most of the owner/managers agreed that they have already been through some sort of crisis before, like the COVID-19 crisis, but without a plan.

> *We had the same "plan" as we had for crises before, in the past 20 years. Actually, actual crisis plans never existed. We just have what we have for years, we are doing a medium-term liquidated preview there, so I see the same way. If there is enough liquidity, it does not matter what will occur. And that has never caused me any major problems in the 20 years that I have been running the company.* (P1)

Some other participants (P2 and P9) stated that all other crises before have had a war as a trigger, or some other catastrophe that was similar to what the World is experiencing right now, during the COVID-19 pandemic. They also stated that after the war, everything was destroyed physically, and everything had to be rebuilt. P2 stated that the difference now is that nothing except interpersonal relationships is destroyed; not material assets and that leads to a completely different situation that has to be re-evaluated.

> *Plan for a situation like this, global pandemic — If I had had a crisis plan, I would have had to revise it, because it could not apply at all. We have the situation that the closure of the borders has also affected foreign trade within the EU. For example, there were heavy transports on their way to us. They were detained at the Polish border last year because the lorry drivers were not allowed to enter the country. And then we reprogrammed the parts and had them processed somewhere in Poland with a delay. But the delay was less than the waiting time at the border, and you cannot draw up a plan for something like that, when the government is involved.* (P2)

P3 also stated that they had a crisis before, but they managed somehow without a pre-crisis plan, and that it would be easier to have a plan. Although, the participant was wondering, can a manager have a plan for a sudden pandemic. In line with Runyan (2006), this respondent noted the lack of crisis preparedness, “high vulnerability and the greater personal impact of a crisis upon the owner-manager (in terms of lost income)”, it can be concluded that the pre-crisis planning is a good investment, for both pandemic and other impacts.

In the interviews, participants P5 and P6 noted that they had never experienced a crisis before, or that they had no pre-crisis plan. Both stated that having gone through a crisis previously or developing pre-crisis plans would make them more prepared for the pandemic now. These responses are showing that, together with a pre-crisis plan, an experience of an owner/manager could have a positive impact on the resilience of the SME firm because of the feeling of safety for both managers/owners and employees.

Participants P7, P9 and P10 stated that they have been through a crisis before, without a pre-crisis plan, and that the experience helped them, but in the pandemic crisis the government is also involved, not just money and liquidity. During COVID-19 pandemic, it was unsure whether they will be able to work tomorrow or not. P10 stated that in their company everything is happening in short term – from month to month. This is showing that long term thinking is very important for the company itself and also the resilience. The capacity of company owners/managers to think strategically in the middle of a crisis is critical to the long-term sustainability of a firm.

We have been through a crisis before, but we did not have a plan nor then, nor now. (P7)

We dealt with this crisis before. My company never had a pre-crisis plan before, it would have been helpful before, I know, but in situations like this crisis now, global pandemic, it is not just up to us, it is also up to the government. It is not just money involved, or liquidity. It is also about are we going to be allowed to work tomorrow or we are going to have another lockdown, and everything will be stopped. (P9)

We have been through a crisis before. It was never like this, because now the government is also involved, but I am not sure that we can have a pre-crisis plan because we cannot plan ahead. In our company, everything is happening in the short term. From month to month (P10).

I have been through a crisis leading my company, but without a plan. So, you can actually say I can now also refer back to the experience of Freud Siemens. That is how I dealt with security. So, that means pandemics, terror, civil wars, natural disasters, such stories on a piece of paper, for the construction sites and also for locations worldwide over 33 globally distributed locations. What happens if one of those sites ended up there due to explosions, war, or something like that? There was a so-called Business Continuity Plan. Every company should do the planning. If some technical crisis arises, IT infrastructure should be back quickly. What about data backup? With us, for example, that is also the case. We have two parts of the building, in one is the tape, there is the server. So, if one burns down, it is not gone immediately, we have a plan for situations like this. But I am not sure about global pandemic crises. (P11)

This respondent has stated very clearly that a "Business Continuity Plan" helped him get through a crisis before and during the pandemic. Although, the pandemic crisis was more unpredictable than the crisis before.

With the pre-crisis plan, one is simply feeling safer and more secure. (P12)

P12 stated that they have never been through a crisis before, but that having a plan is always helpful in general. As Alijuhmani and Emeagwali (2017) pointed out, the techniques are utilized to redirect risks and decrease or even prevent the impact of the crisis. According to Smith (1992), a crisis can create a shift in an organization's strategic direction, such as the imposition of new limits or a complete reversal. A crisis, on the other hand, might take a firm in new directions and possibly even to new prospects that were previously unattainable. Both approaches include equivalent studies of environmental factors, stakeholders, and managers' roles and participation. Also, simplified, the owner/manager is feeling safer and more secure with a pre-crisis plan in hand, and that is having a psychological and physical impact on improvement in the other areas of business during a crisis.

> *We have had a crisis before, and same as now, we made a crisis plan when the crisis began. We took the pre-crisis plan from another associated company from Stuttgart, and we adopted it for our company. The adaptation was relatively quick because it was very global. But all the essential points were immediately available to us. But we did not think about such things in advance, because we always optimistically assume that what has been can be continued in a positive way. I think that is in our nature, as humans - to think positively. But who could have ever been mentally prepared for the crisis? If we had a plan, maybe crisis management would have been better, but nothing major would have changed if the situation remained the same. Everything else will be conjecture and I assume that through a high degree of improvisation skills the company will be able to master the situation even without a pandemic plan. But that is individual. You need flexible minds, lateral thinking, minds that can master this through improvisation and control, that can take action depending on the situation. (P13)*

As may be seen from participant responses, some participants have never been through a crisis before leading a company, but most of them were. As already mentioned in the Chapter 2, pre-crisis planning might be a good investment for those SMEs that are liquid and stronger, but considering responses from participants, it would be easy to conclude that perhaps a dose of fear from planning is present. P13 mentioned that a person cannot be mentally prepared for a crisis. Pre-crisis planning, according to Hough and Spillan (2005), focuses on the actions that should be handled before the crisis occurs. It also involves analysing and resolving vulnerabilities in order to avert or reduce the severity of a crisis.

Also, participants P1, P3, P5, P9, P12 stated that for other types of crisis having a pre-crisis plan would be helpful, but not for COVID-19 pandemic, because the current situation, as well as the politics play a major role. According to Heide and Simonsson (2019) the global pandemic is an emergent crisis with external origin (See Chapter 2). They also stated that a suddenly occurring crisis leads to more or less immediate consequences and demands a rapid response from leadership and others in the organization. By slowly emerging, they meant crises that arise gradually over time. Emerging crises rarely require complete and systemic measures to be fixed.

According to the findings, the majority of the SMEs questioned were affected by the COVID-19 epidemic. Some companies suffered significant damage, while others did not. The most common outcomes were a decrease in orders and delivery delays. Some have also voiced fear that the crisis would have an impact on their capacity to operate and survive their firms.

Considering that Branicki (2007) stated that SMEs have fewer resources than larger companies (i.e., lack of access to finance), SMEs do have the advantage of less concerning formal systems which can "shorten chains of decision-making" and "speed up response times". Moreover, there is a lack of clarity on pre-crisis planning. The literature does not offer adequate guidance on how leaders in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) should behave when crises arise.

Having in mind that most of the participants said that they did not have a pre-crisis plan, neither for COVID-19 pandemic nor for crises before, and that they were successful, but that most of them consider that their resilience would have been better with a crisis plan, it can be concluded that the pre-crisis plan is not mandatory for a SMEs resilience, but it can improve it in many ways, as well as to give the feeling of safety to employees, and therefore evoke feeling of mutual trust.

4.2.2. Internal Crisis Communication

“Internal communication refers to a company’s-controlled communication system in which employees are seen as an internal public or stakeholder group” (Vercic et al., 2012, p. 225).

Research sub-issue: How do owners/managers communicate with their employees during the crisis? Should there be certain rules for communication and behaviour in the company during the crisis?

> *Bilateral conversation. It was always like that, but now more intense. More regular conversations with employees. Communication rules are something that I would find extremely helpful. People are living in fear of losing their jobs, and that is making this whole crisis even worse than it is. (P1)*

Successful leadership communication, according to Luthra and Dahiya (2015), requires conveying messages while keeping the recipient's knowledge and ability in mind, as well as ensuring that the receiver receives the entire meaning of the message or information conveyed to him. When communicating, effective leaders must guarantee that there is no potential of miscommunication or misunderstanding. Considering what

P1 stated, a successful owner/manager in SME must be aware that people are afraid during a crisis, and to try to calm them down. This was also confirmed by participant P2:

> *Via notices, e-mails, circulars, and personal conversations. And in some cases, simply on a bilateral level. There is no other way with the restrictions of not meeting and still talking. Yes, it is difficult, but I think it works. Now, if I can do it all again, I would implement online communication earlier, that would have been helpful. There are rules for communication in the company, but they are not accepted enough by people. The most important rule that should be implemented in every company, in my opinion, is that every employee and every supervisor is an individual human being, and I, as a leader, must understand that first in order for other employees to understand.* ***People have fears, especially in times of crises.*** *(P2)*

As stated by this participant (P2), if the communication during the pandemic started online earlier, everything would be much easier – that is also proof of the benefits of pre-crisis planning.

> *In personal conversations. I explained to them in writing how the company was doing and what help we had been promised by the federal government. Nevertheless, I tried to pay the wages on time, although there was hardly any income, I used up all my remaining cash and took on debts for the first time in 15 years. (P3)*

> *I have communicated with my employees relatively openly, honestly, calmly, and on a regular basis. The only thing I would change is that maybe sometimes we took too long to communicate, so faster. Only if you do it faster, you have the*

problem again that the employees then possibly did not have it all figured out. (P5)

Open communication. I do not think anyone can set any rules for communication. (P6)

According to Luthra and Dahiya (2015), a leader's inability to communicate effectively with his team is hampered by a lack of planning and purpose prior to communicating with others, and a leader's use of inappropriate tools and techniques for communicating with the team acts as a barrier and reduces the level of exact understanding of the communication done. Furthermore, effective leadership communication, according to the aforementioned authors (2015), entails transmitting messages while keeping the receiver's ability and knowledge in mind, as well as ensuring that the receiver will be able to determine the true meaning of the message or information delivered to him. Effective leaders must ensure that there is no confusion or misunderstanding when communicating. Considering what P1 stated, a successful owner/manager in SME must be aware that people are afraid during a crisis, and to try to calm them down.

...in times of crises, our flaws are more visible. (P13)

Considering that the crisis requires a mutual trust between employer and employee, the interactional model proposed by Brent and Gigliotti (2017) may be the most successful since it aims to capture more of the intricacy and two-way impact between a leader and a follower. Although, on the other hand, considering P13 and his opinion that not everything should be shared, the classical linear model might be the most appropriate for communication in times of crisis.

Having in mind that most of the participants said that mutual trust and open communication is important during the crisis in order to be more effective and resilient, an interactional model should be used in most of the time where mutual trust exists. Having meetings with employees occasionally, to motivate them.

Whilst most of the participants stated that completely open communication is the best for the company in times of crisis, also the most of them agreed that the communication plan for times of crisis would be beneficial. As P13 stated, employees are often afraid and in panic, sometimes not all information should be passed to employees, in order to minimize the panic among them. Participant P12 stated that also employees should be involved in shaping a pre-crisis communication plan, before the crisis itself. Although, this might only have the contra-effect, considering what other participants stated about the fear the employees are dealing with during the crisis.

4.2.3. Leadership

The most significant distinction between how leadership is implemented in a large organization and in a small and medium-sized enterprise is the leader's influence over his subordinates (Mihai, 2015). In SMEs, the owner/manager has direct and personal control over his employees (Bass, 1981).

Research sub-issue: What is the most important when it comes to leadership in times of crisis?

That you keep a cold head, think how you can be like this or more. Keep in mind the wishes of your employees and their demands even in times of crisis and set a good example. (P1)

Staying calm is the most significant for leadership during the crisis. (P5)

What is most indispensable is first of all that you are in control of yourself, that you document to the outside world that you are not helplessly facing a situation and are helpless and nervous and afraid, but that you clearly and distinctly show your whole appearance. One simply has the entire view and thus also one, as they say, in control. Yes, there is always a way. A way to find a solution. There is always a solution, and you must convey that. (P12)

Bearing in mind that leadership is a multifaceted and complicated construct in which leaders direct followers toward a common goal or purpose (Mikkelson et al., 2019), that it is applied differently in SMEs and large organizations, and that leadership refers to the influence a leader has over his followers (Mihai, 2015) because the leader (owner/manager) of an SME has a direct influence upon his staff (Bass, 1981), it is very important to know what is the most important when it comes to leadership in times of crisis in SMEs.

Some participants stated that a leader should always make an effort in the company, despite the crisis, and that staying calm is beneficial. Others stated that it is essential to have an understanding towards the employees and not to command. Most of them agreed that being honest is the most significant and not to show fear and transfer insecurities that way.

Although the crisis is hard for both leaders and employees, it is concluded that leaders must have some rules for leadership in times of crisis for the company to be more resilient. As P13 stated

...if a leader shows weakness to the outside world, he is no longer followed and thus a leader, a company, an organization, loses its credibility.

As a result, in order to survive during a crisis, a business need a proactive management (Almeida et al., 2015). The proactive personality is a quality that will influence the success of an organization and must be held by the organizational management (Jawahar and Liu, 2016; Li et al., 2010).

Considering that the leadership in Germany is different from the leadership in other countries (Adler, 2002), it would be beneficial if the same study is conducted in other countries. For German leaders, as stated by participants, it is the most important that leader is there to support employees in times of crisis, to motivate them and to understand them, but the most of the participants also stated that it is important to have in mind a nature of crisis – and if the leadership is not consistent, it will have impact on everything and anyone in times of crisis. P13 stated that if leader shows weakness to the outside world he is no longer followed, and this sentence is saying a lot about German culture and Leadership in Germany.

4.2.4. Resilience in SMEs and Larger Organisations

Branicki (et al.,2017) states that planning, resource, abundance, highly developed formal processes and systems, as well as redundancy have the key role for resilience in large organizations, but they are lacking in SMEs. Therefore, she is considering micro-foundations (entrepreneurship and individual resilience). Since SMEs usually have fewer resources than larger companies (lack of access to finance). On the other hand, SMEs have the advantage of less concerning formal systems. These SME traits help reduce decision-making chains and accelerate reaction times in the event of a crisis. In her research paper, it is shown that, although Battisti and Deakins (2012) stated that SMEs lack resilience, that is not completely true, since SMEs are having some advantages, which larger companies do not have.

Research sub-issue: What is the most important factor for resilience in SMEs, and is it easier for large companies to be resilient?

Most of the participants stated that the German government is providing more for larger companies in times of crisis than for SMEs, and that hundreds of SMEs would "survive" from the help that one large organization is receiving. On the other hand, some participants looked from another perspective and said that it would be less stressful for them, as leaders, to cope with "8 people losing their jobs, then 800", if they were leaders of a larger organization.

Again, as stated by most of the participants, in Germany it is considered that bigger companies got a greater attention by the government in terms of financial help, which is making them more resilient than SMEs. Considering that the Germany's power lays in the SMEs companies, because of the annual turnover they make is significantly more than the larger companies, and therefore they play an important role in Germany's BDP, it would be beneficial if another study was conducted on this topic.

Furthermore, the majority of the participants said that good leadership and good communication between owners/managers and employees are essential for SME resilience in times of crisis, but a good financial background prior to the crisis is also significant.

> *...As for the SMEs it is important to have liquidity in times of crisis, flexibility of staff and management is also important, which is certainly difficult in Germany in times of COVID-19 pandemic. (P4)*

> *The most essential is not to lose courage. Yes, to say occasionally, there is no solution for today. I will dedicate myself to the task again tomorrow, because otherwise you do not get anywhere in a collection of ideas, and that prevents the topic. To come up with some kind of solution. It is vital to communicate with many people in order to get as much information as possible before making a decision. The more information you get from somewhere. Even if it is very small. The more likely you are to get an overall picture of what could happen next and to factor that in right away. That is the most significant thing. (P2)*

> *If you deal with people properly in times of crisis and in normal times, I believe that you will have them on your side even in the worst times. (P3)*

As stated by participant P3 above, it is important for leaders to be supportive before the crisis as well as during the crisis, because that way, employees will have trust in their leader even in the worst times.

4.2.5. Employees' behaviour in times of crisis

Research sub-issue: How do leaders expect from employees in times of crisis, and how do their behaviour change in times of crisis?

I expect my employees to have hope and assertiveness. They certainly lose hope during the crisis. (P4)

Bass (1998) stated that leaders' behaviour can evoke positive or negative emotional reactions with employees. Some participants said that they are expecting trust and understanding from their employees in times of crisis. While others stated that there is only one way—to expect from employees what they are giving to them — in this case, according to Nickerk (2013), this evokes Conscious leadership.

I expect from my employee's loyalty and integration, as well as identification with the company. And trust. And crisis insecurity made them lethargic, aimless… (P13)

5. Conclusion

5.1. Objective of the Chapter

The goal of this research is to determine the impact of pre-crisis planning, organizational communication, and leadership on the crisis response of German SMEs.

The findings were presented and analysed in Chapter 4 in the context of a literature review. Conclusion chapter presents the Revised Conceptual Framework for Practice, as well as the Contribution to Knowledge, Limitations of this research, and Author's Note.

The contributions of this research to knowledge will be articulated and explored, and a Revised Conceptual Framework will be provided as an updated conceptual framework that was originally offered as an output of the literature review.

The research's limitations will be discussed, and recommendations for further research and study in the areas of pre-crisis management, organizational communication, and crisis leadership in SMEs will be made.

5.2. Revised Conceptual Framework

Figure 5.1: Revised Conceptual Framework (Source: Author's own)

As shown from the interviews and discussion in Chapter 4, pre-crisis planning has a positive impact on leaders and employees during the crisis with the feeling of safety that it evokes. Certainly, the pre-crisis plan cannot be uniform for all SMEs in Germany, since the business typology (SMEs, family owned or not, how many employees) (Filser et al., 2016) plays a crucial role for the pre-crisis plan.

On the other hand, crisis management in SMEs is typically the responsibility of the leader (owner/manager), and thus the leadership style must be adapted to the situation in such a way that a leader has a proactive personality in order to be strong and successful in leading a company through a crisis.

With a leader that does not show his weaknesses and not transferring the fear during the crisis, who is honest and has understanding, employees will develop trust into their leader and therefore follow the leader in any circumstances, and in that way help the company dealing with the crisis.

All together make a continuous commutative communication process that lead the SME company towards resilience.

5.3. Contributions of this Research

The knowledge gained from the literature research is outlined in the Conceptional framework (Figure 2.7). With the further research on conducted interviews and the practical relevance, this crucial knowledge gain emerged to Revised Conceptual Framework (Figure 5.1). Understanding the crisis management process may aid German SMEs in successfully and efficiently coping with a crisis. Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) may acquire a better grasp of their operations and vital resources. It would be beneficial to discover areas of the company that may be enhanced, resulting in a continuous process of improvement and long-term growth. Furthermore, when confronted with a crisis, it would provide greater assurance rather than ambiguity, increasing the likelihood of survival.

This study will help practitioners in German SMEs have a better grasp of crisis management and how to execute it, as well as communication in times of crisis as well as crisis leadership style. It can help individuals make informed decisions by focusing on the underlying practices of the various stages. Furthermore, it has the potential to change people's perceptions about crisis management and pre-crisis planning in general. They may know that crisis management is critical for businesses, and that preparation and planning are critical for survival. Furthermore, it may challenge the perspective of viewing the crisis not just as a bad feature, but also as an opportunity for change or improvement before another possible crisis develops.

As a contribution to practice, this work can be relevant to owners and managers of SMEs in crisis management. As it is already pointed out throughout this thesis, the literature in this area is very scarce, and therefore this paper can be useful. Not only author's personal goal was to deal with crisis situations in a stronger way, but to give business managers of SME's a sense of security. Of course, having in mind that not every crisis is the same, but COVID-19, as well as this research has shown that employees should be the most important asset. As an owner of an SME in Germany, author must be able to lead employees in times of crisis and give them a feeling of security. Only then she can be sure, as a manager, that her day-to-day business will work. This ability also gives the space and time to concentrate on customers/markets or liquidity, for example.

Despite the author's experience as a managing director for more than 10 years and expertise in external communication, she had to experience herself how difficult it is to act as a human being and as a manager during a crisis. A critical self-reflection during writing the thesis made it clear once again how important it is to deal intensively with this topic. There will always be crises. Even the war in Ukraine can be considered a global crisis. Besides the personal fear, it is the fear of how the company will survive this crisis. Many of the existing customers have immense difficulties in procuring materials or have had to adjust their prices so intensively due to the sudden energy crisis that they have lost essential customers.

Improved crisis management and leadership in German SMEs may help society in a variety of ways. It might lower the number of lay-offs or possibly prevent many insolvent SMEs from failing during a crisis. This advantage may result in overall economic development, greater public welfare, and the government spending less on governmental funding for SMEs. In general, competent and efficient crisis management and pre-crisis preparation can lead to an upward spiral; yet, if not managed properly, it can lead to a “downward spiral”.

5.4. Limitations and directions for further research

There are various limitations to this study. For example, it began with the assumption that all questioned SMEs were significantly hit by the COVID-19 pandemic; nevertheless, some firms were not substantially harmed. If the author had been able to conduct interviews with more impacted companies, she could have produced richer empirical data since they would have had to deal with crisis management in more depth. Furthermore, empirical research was conducted throughout the crisis. As a result, it may have an influence on the respondents' perception of the recovery phase. Furthermore, the interviews were conducted with German firms, the majority of which were from Sachsen-Anhalt.

Furthermore, the diverse corporate cultures of the organizations examined were not taken into account. Organizational structures, symbols, processes, and power hierarchies might differ from one corporation to the next. As a result, each company might take a different strategy and have different perspectives on how to cope with the situation.

Despite its vast breadth, researchers found employee motivation to be an important subject for SMEs. Staff are one of the most important resources, thus subsequent study might look at how SMEs encourage their employees in times of crisis.

Furthermore, as previously stated, the study is being undertaken amid a COVID-19 pandemic crisis. As a result, the empirical conclusion may differ from that at a period when there is no continuous crisis. The thesis focuses on crisis management procedures, which comprise the company's plan for dealing with a crisis from a pre-crisis scenario, during the crisis, and after the crisis.

5.5. Author’s note

During working on my DBA thesis, I have already spoken at networking events, business associations and conferences about how important it is to intensify and positively influence internal communication as the managing director or owner of a company in a crisis that was previously unimaginable for us.

The economic environment under COVID-19 changed rapidly. While companies currently focused on continuing their day-to-day business, internal communication often fell into oblivion. While employees, partners, and customers understand that management cannot have an immediate answer for everything, it is essential to show that leaders are not forgetting their team.

In this unprecedented crisis, employees in particular are playing a crucial role in keeping the company’s day-to-day business running.

This makes it all the more important to publish my thesis, especially at this time. Many entrepreneurs have already approached me and/or asked when they can finally expect the publication. It is very significant for many to know what other entrepreneurs have implemented to date and how they describe or analyse internal communication.

This publication is to strengthen the owners of SMEs in such a way that they do not have to fight alone with these problems and a penetration of this relevant guidance quality is quite possible.

Many of my associates have asked when they would be able to read my work, since they are eager for information and knowledge. Since conducting my study, I have discovered that I am, personally, dealing with the crises in my company better. For example, due to the present situation in Ukraine, I lost one project that my firm was working on for the Russian market. My research assisted me in learning how to accurately communicate with my employees during a crisis, because they were aware that we had lost the project, and as a result of my proactive leadership, they were not panicking, and I had time to deal with the contract, and I managed to redirect hours of that project for a German company on the Russian market to the UK market until the war is over.

Precisely, that was also my primary goal: to help all the SMEs managers and owners to cope with a crisis better than before, to create understanding of this problem, to offer them a possible change of direction in their leadership style, as a contribution to practice.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Participant information sheet and privacy notice

Version:
Date:

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET AND PRIVACY NOTICE

TITLE OF PROJECT: Influence of the crisis-management and pre-crisis planning on the leadership and internal organizational communication in times of crisis in German SMEs

Invitation

The University of Worcester engages in a wide range of research which seeks to provide greater understanding of the world around us, to contribute to improved human health and well-being and to provide answers to social, economic and environmental problems.

We would like to invite you to take part in one of our research projects. Before you decide whether to take part, it is important that you understand why the research is being done, what it will involve for you, what information we will ask from you, and what we will do with that information.

We will in the course of this project be collecting personal information. Under General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) 2016, we are required to provide a justification (what is called a "legal basis") in order to collect such information. The legal basis for this project is "**task carried out in the public interest**". Since the personal information we will be collecting in this project is defined under GDPR as "special category" data, that is more sensitive data requiring greater protection, we must identify an additional legal basis. This additional legal basis is ***"necessary for scientific research in accordance with safeguards"***.

You can find out more about our approach to dealing with your personal information at https://www.worcester.ac.uk/informationassurance/visitor-privacy-notice.html.

Please take time to read this document carefully.

What is the purpose of the research?
This study aims to identify and find the connection between Crisis management and Leadership role in German small and medium-sized companies in times of crisis. The research aims to examine whether there is and can be implemented uniform pre-crisis planning model for all companies under 100 employees.

Who is undertaking the research?
Caroline Krause, DBA researcher at the University of Worcester.

Who is funding the research?
Caroline Krause

Who has oversight of the research?
The research has been approved by the Research Ethics Panel for the College of Business, Psychology and Sport at University of Worcester in line with the University's Research Ethics Policy. The University of Worcester acts as the "Data Controller" for personal data collected through its research projects & is subject to the General Data Protection Regulation 2016. We are registered with the Information Commissioner's Office and our Data Protection Officer is Helen Johnstone (infoassurance@worc.ac.uk). For more on our approach to Information Assurance and Security visit: https://www.worcester.ac.uk/informationassurance/index.html.

Why have I been invited to take part?
You have received this invitation because you are an owner/manager of the small or medium-sized company that might be of interest for the research. We are hoping to recruit 12-15 participants for this study.

Do I have to take part?
No. It is up to you to decide whether or not you want to take part in this study. Deciding to take part or not will not impact on your company, work and your career. If you do decide to take part you can withdraw from the study until 14 days following data collection. If you wish to have your data withdrawn please contact us (our contact details are given below) with your participant number and your data will then not be used. You will be given this number at the beginning of the interview. If you do decide to take part, you will be asked to sign a consent form.

What will happen if I agree to take part?
If you agree to take part, you will

- Take the part in the online interview conducted via "Google Teams". The link for video interview will be sent to you via email. Interview will be conducted on date and time previously agreed with the researcher.
- The interview will last approximately 30 minutes.
- Be asked questions about your previous experiences with crisis management in your company, leadership and communication; your views about it and how do you think it should be done in the future.

- The interview will be video recorded so that the researcher can transcribe them properly.
- Visual recordings will be saved until transcribed.
- At the completion of the project, we will retain transcript of your interview in the anonymised form that it was collected for at least 10 years. This anonymised transcript will be archived and shared in line with our Policy for the Effective Management of Research Data *or* we will destroy all data relating to the project.

What are the benefits for me in taking part?

Contribution to knowledge, better understanding of an importance of pre-crisis planning and crisis management as well as leadership and internal communication in times of crisis.

Are there any risks for me if I take part?

The research

- Has no any potential risks or disadvantages for you, your company and/or career. If answering to the questions in any time during the interview evoke distressing memories, please inform the interviewer immediately. You can withdraw from this interview at any time.
- If you share any information during the interview, which may oblige the researcher to pass on that information, for example, illegal practices during a company crisis. In this case it is researcher responsibility to report these accordingly.
- The research is confidential. However, the researcher can not guarantee that there is no possibility of confidentiality breach. If this is the case, you will be informed immediately.
- There are not any COVID-19 related risks of participating considering that interview will be conducted online.

What will you do with my information?

Your personal data / information will be treated confidentially at all times; that is, it will not be shared with anyone other than project supervisors. It will also not be shared with any third parties specified in the consent form unless it has been fully anonymised. The exception to this is where you tell us something that indicates that you or someone else is at risk of harm.

During the project, all data / information will be kept securely in line with the University's Policy for the Effective Management of Research Data and its Information Security Policy.

We will process your personal information for a range of purposes associated with the project primary of which are:

- To use your information along with information gathered from other participants in the research project to seek new knowledge and understanding that can be derived from the information we have gathered.
- To summarise this information in written form for the purposes of dissemination (through research reports, a thesis / dissertation, conference papers, journal articles or other publications). Any information disseminated / published will be at a summary level and will be fully anonymised and there will be no way of identifying your individual personal information within the published results.
- To use the summary and conclusions arising from the research project for teaching and further research purposes. Any information used in this way will be at a summary level and will be fully anonymised. There will be no way of identifying your individual personal information from the summary information used in this way.

If you wish to receive a summary of the research findings or to be given access to any of the publications arising from the research, please contact us.

How long will you keep my data for?
Your personal data will be retained for at least10 years as required by law or a specified regulatory body.

At the completion of the project, we will retain your data only in anonymised form. This anonymised data will be archived and shared in line with our Policy for the Effective Management of Research Data.

How can I find out what information you hold about me?
You have certain rights in respect of the personal information the University holds about you. For more information about Individual Rights under GDPR and how you exercise them please visit:
https://www.worcester.ac.uk/informationassurance/requests-for-personal-data.html.

What happens next?
Please keep this information sheet.

We will wait for at least 30 days before asking for your decision on whether you would like to take part and will be delighted to answer any further questions you have about the research.

Our contact details are:
Caroline Krause
email: krac1_18@uni.worc.ac.uk
phone: +49(0) 172 / 38 39 482

If you have any concerns about the project at this point or at any later date you may contact the researcher (contact as above) or you may contact the Supervisor: Dr. Ria Wiid (Director of Studies)

Thank you for taking the time to read this information.

If you would like to speak to an independent person who is not a member of the research team, please contact the University of Worcester, using the following details:

Secretary to Research Ethics Panel for College of Business, Psychology and Sport
University of Worcester
Henwick Grove
Worcester WR2 6AJ
ethics@worc.ac.uk

Appendix B: UW Consent Form (Non-NHS)

University of Worcester

INFORMED CONSENT FORM (NON-NHS RESEARCH)

Title of Project: Influence of the crisis-management and pre-crisis planning on the leadership and internal organizational communication in times of crisis in German SMEs.

Participant identification number for this study:

Name of Researcher: Caroline Krause

I, the undersigned, confirm that (**please initial boxes as appropriate**):

1.	I have read and understood the information about the project, as provided in the Information Sheet dated ________________ or it has been read to me.	
2.	I have been able to ask questions about the project and my participation and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.	
3.	I understand that taking part in this study involves recording interview and transcribing it word by word completely anonymously. Transcribed documents will be stored safely in the database. Recordings will be destroyed after transcribed.	
4.	I understand I can withdraw at any time without giving reasons and that I will not be penalised for withdrawing nor will I be questioned on why I have withdrawn.	
5.	I understand that the information I provide will be used for: • Reports • Publications • Researches	
6.	I agree that my information can be quoted in research outputs.	
7.	The procedures regarding confidentiality have been clearly explained (e.g., use of names, pseudonyms, anonymisation of data, etc.) to me.	
8.	I understand that personal information collected about me that can identify me, such as my name, or where I live, will not be shared beyond the study team.	
9.	I consent to the audio and video recording.	
10.	I am over 18 years old.	
11.	I understand that other researchers will have access to this data only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the data and if they agree to the terms I have specified in this form.	

12.	I give permission for the anonymised interview transcript that I provide to be deposited in Worcester University so that it can be used for future research and learning. The transcripts will be kept securely in the university's storage facility after the study is completed to enable use in potential publications. Transcript data will be stored for at least 10 years after the publication of the thesis. At the end of this period, the date will be reviewed and destroyed according to their degree of use.	
13.	I voluntarily agree to participate in the project.	
14.	I know who to contact if I have any concerns about this research.	

....	....	....
Name of Participant	Signature	Date
....	....	....
Name of Researcher	Signature	Date

Appendix C: Interview guide

1. Since every company in 2020 went through the crisis, can you explain how you managed to deal with it?
2. Did you have a pre-crisis plan for situations like this?

If the answer is yes, then:

1. Can you describe what the plan consisted of?
2. How did you as an employer communicate with your employees during the crisis?
3. In hindsight, what would you change in your communication during the crisis?
4. What do you think is important for the company's ability to resilience?
5. How does resilience strengthen the company's response?
6. What do you think leadership behaviour should be like in times of crisis?
7. Do you think that, if there are certain rules of communication and behaving in the company during a crisis, that would be helpful and what do you think the most important rules should be?
8. What is the most important thing when it comes to leadership in your opinion?
9. How is your leadership style affecting your employees?
10. How many employees do you have?
11. Are you an owner manager or only a manager in your organization?
12. Can you name a couple of things that you expect from your employees in times of crisis?
13. Do you think it is easier for big companies to cope with a crisis, and why?
14. Did your employees behave differently in times of crisis than usual, and how?
15. Did you ever deny responsibility during the crisis?
16. Would you do better for your company or for your employees?
17. What do you think that in Germany is the most used way of communication and leadership in Small and Medium Enterprise?

If the answer is no, then:

1. In your opinion, was your company successful in dealing with the crisis?
2. Do you regret not having the pre - crisis plan and do you think it would be helpful? If
   Yes, what do you think would improve?
3. Do you think that your company would be more successful in crisis management if
   there was pre-crisis planning and why?
4. How did you as an employer communicate with your employees during the crisis?
5. In hindsight, what would you change in your communication during the crisis?
6. How does resilience strengthen the company's response?
7. What do you think leadership behaviour should be like in times of crisis?
8. Do you think that, if there are certain rules of communication and behaving in the company during crisis, that would be helpful and what do you think the most important rules should be?
9. What is the most important thing when it comes to leadership in your opinion?
10. How is your leadership style affecting your employees?
11. How many employees do you have?
12. Are you an owner manager or just manager in your organization?
13. Can you name a couple of things that you expect from your employees in times of crisis?
14. Do you think it is easier for big companies to cope with a crisis and why?
15. Did your employees behave differently in times of crisis than usual, and how?
16. Did you ever deny responsibility during the crisis?
17. Would you do better for your company or for your employees?
18. What do you think that in Germany is the most used way of communication and leadership in Small and Medium Enterprise?

Appendix D: Interview P1

1. As every company in 2020 has gone through the crisis, can you explain how you have managed to deal with it. Before the crisis, did you have some kind of crisis plan for situations like this?

Actually, the crisis plan never existed. We actually just have what I actually have for years, I do a medium-term liquidated preview there, so I see the same way. If there is any liquidity better no matter what they arise from will occur? And that has never caused me any major problems in the 20 years that I have been running the company here.

2. In your opinion, has your company been successful in dealing with the crisis?

Because of our broad customer base, we actually coped very well with the crisis last year. And that is shaping up to be the same, same level in 2021.

3. Do you regret that you did not have a crisis plan, and do you think that would be better if you had one? And what do you think would have improved in your company?

I think the crisis plan actually would not have helped much. Just being because of the few people we have; it does not actually do anything. Although I have to pull crisis plan. But of course, it would have been bad if you had spoiled somewhere. Then you would have had to say, "We are going to do pre-set shifts. That you do not see the shifts." But actually, I can say that we are making a big contingency plan here, because you have your rough preview of what orders are in there and therefore you can see how far you will get with what you have. And then you can say that you pull the ripcord two or three months beforehand and structure yourself again. Because we had the preview, which we have already said, we do not need to take any major measures to make progress. We had actually only done one thing. That was more idle time. In the good times of 2009/10, I doubled the DRAM profit again. I did not have to do that once. Oh, makes more from the point of view that the orders were too big. But that also has the advantage. While we do not have a newer need that in an emergency. The money should be able to help. That is one thing that, yes, some who are here just a framework against the bick in the swarm so that the time, the word Euro Wasteland interest happens when no one down. That is one thing I am I have to style chilis man children´s pictures. Nothing is worse than when you can somehow pay against because the so the staff me now should look up the behaviour of the staff in. And that is the good version TMT. I have never had that happen that we did not have an accident and you do not really hear that from all companies.

4. As a manager, how did you communicate with your staff during the crisis?

Actually, it was always like now, in the times of crisis. Every morning everyone was greeted. Now that has been stopped accordingly and it is all over. Now to say tomorrow. And then the thing was to keep the distance. Now. Currently here and there but one difficult limbo to. Which then to keep it settled because it does not work out. One must have actually always considered good that one bypasses it every morning. On it one must anticipate only the regulations and prescribed had were units. And yes of course, if it fits what to say was to exchange there have in any case meant what one made the good there have just spoken with the about it. Which phases do we have in advance? Which measures are valid for us? How we have to stand in and keep complaints. And all this in a bilateral conversation. I think one is brought together with me with what. May I take a picture? There must be a rule about that. Prescribed by the brain.

5. Looking back, would you change anything about your communication during the crisis? Or was it correct as far as it went?

I have no concerns so far. Yes, so far everything is just fine.

6. In your opinion, what is important for the resilience of the company in times of crisis? Although we have already briefly discussed the topic of liquidity, so that you have a bit of a secure anchor, was there anything else where you said, “That was important to us, we should pay attention to that in the future as well“. Important what do we actually do? You need good sales; you have to look at where markets are disappearing. You always have to acquire new customers. You have to set the latest tomorrows and not stand still forever. You always have to try to have your clientele. There is always a way. Or calculated out.

7. Do you think it would be helpful if there were certain rules for communication and behaviour in the company during a crisis? And what do you think should be the most important rules?

This is what I would find good. What there used to be with us in my time, which was also the so go with already 2 yrs. I want to be so spilled over for young entrepreneurs it’s kind of give a managing director probable. Where one is a little sour on the interplay of the commercial side of the company and the technical self-improvement and principle. Context says. You cannot detach them all the time. But I do not know any. Can I understand you? After all, it is an interaction. And there we have for you again two semesters in Magdeburg, because we had no chance to the target time. We have their VBE. Should have. We have a little more than 2-3 semesters afterwards that or whitening makes Bavarian. I think that is also important today, that young entrepreneurs and managers at Yucca are given some kind of training to get to know these things. How is the mood when I am communicating a lot at the moment, already there? Yes, you get along, I have to get along. Yes, up to the thing, the personally meagre. There is a rainbow for the other numbers that you generate practically automatically through accounting and so you do then. But there are no such programs, no notion, where you have to be practically orders that are first recorded in the form opponent, the funds should generate material costs. If you are using his debugger there is a lot written.

8. What do you think is the most important thing when it comes to leadership in times of crisis?

That you keep cold head, think how you can be like this or more. Nixon is now Japanese and was overturned by the staff and not keeping calm. You have to try to say what if something happens. Silliest case mothballs hours what happens somewhere corona promote. How can must. How can then come out with it recently. Build a museum here. With things you have to have behind money, but a bank to buy up and there. For example, one person. Now at the beginning such a doomsaying, because here all the same stirred up so was the opinion he knows the doctor from Italy and now it goes off and that is it not even the tip that it is there, what happens to him at the moment. So, we said that from next week on you will stay at home for a while. If you stay at home for 4 weeks and then we have other people working on the machine, then he is at home and you should come to work. Simply because he really stepped up his game in the bathroom, partly in work gloves at a machine and his things and we have to do that and we know how to do that and we know contactless, they do that and we have to do that. The machines have to be disinfected every day. He had no tackle at all. That was in the very beginning too, but only from people. Fairer we are so big. And for me reality came, for me for me after minute. I have to put a stage truant here. Long I water and soap. Yeah, I do not have to do if I do not want to stick with this number. If I interdimensional is accurately described. The best example was the beginning of the crisis. Hoofbeat. What you want away with paper or packages? A vision is yes to see that such devices can get out immediately first time quite a few “nettenmair”. By the way, I can also call them into the camera specially. But that is one thing. Where the one now here free hour. The tapes will have to. Would have been enough. And work. The cost so fast music and has loud toilet paper. That is not how it comes to me. I do not have any more. But you just have to see that people first want to make the mood. Somewhere. Accordingly, a lot of people. That will not do you any good, because you do not see Rado in the vicinity of people who do not see each other during the day. I stand there as a collector, they just tell you. But does the one wants the other only from the we on and.

9. What do you expect from your employees in times of crisis?

Duality? That is a difficult question. Can you actually demand something? There are those who are really spinning their wheels, who think that I have to travel again despite the corona. You just have to make sure that you limit everything at the moment and do not go abroad. It is just one thing to say that the secondary market would be wiser. Whereas it was at that time. I do not think anyone will dare, because it is nothing. If you go abroad now, you have to give 2 weeks quarantine or one week and in the future clean 2 weeks quarantine, not believe and do it voluntarily. Therefore, they will think what nobody likes. I demand that pandemic regulations are obliged. I simply demand not to endanger my own team and I am also a little bit pointed; some rules are Niederhausen before like now here with the inversions to keep out. Admiral, do you come where I go there but there where it goes. Whereas go in action I am exaggerated, but if they really big parties, so why do I become unhealthy? It is funny when that happens to me. But I think that we do not have the values where we can assume that. Do you recognize? I do not think it is all pretty cautious and maybe my corona suspicions stay. Quarantine television games extended until now here also in places of worship where the daughter as a nurse or the rapid test positive or negative. There we have first what pucks where yes said comes out again on the market. Because there would be probably also equal to the dignity as with any other primal source a little bit pushed away. After all, you can.

10. Do you think it is easier for corporations, for example, to cope with a crisis?

It is important what we actually do in times of crisis and how much we work. If the sales are good, you have to try to find new customers, regardless of the circumstances. I think it is easier for bigger companies to be resilient in times of crisis because they have more liquidity and they will always have better support from the government.

11. Did your employees behave differently than usual in times of crisis? And how?

As I said, that is what I am trying to do, not to set up the conspiracy theories. But that is, as I said, the human factor. Everyone is different. And that is why you cannot make any accusations. If he is of the opinion, he is of the opinion. That is just the way it is. You can tell me. You do not have to walk on it, or are you sure? That is just his business. Yes, you have to be of the opinion that if he tv-films here, then he has to stay at home. During that period. Well, what people have, yes. But most of it is actually normal. Then we continue to work and then...

12. During the crisis, did you ever deny responsibility to your staff?

Clearly no.

13. Looking back, would you do more for your company or for your employees in times of crisis?

Probably have to have freed up the solutions.

14. What do you think is the most used type of communication in small and medium-sized enterprises between managers and employees in Germany?

The personal conversation, as it was with us today, is there, unfortunately. I say you cannot get any closer to the people. You have a goal, don´t you? With than if big layer the sayings make you now big, big hang out, big appearance and big speeches swing you here with. There is no more reaction coming out. At this talk. Now convinced. We used to have here a big gathering. No one may make them anymore nowadays. That is going to end. They have the problem. You too. That is the next problem. If you would make a meeting. All people, as you need it once together so that holds this speech actually takes place. Yes, you always have 5 or 6 people who are the outsiders, the stewards of others or third parties, and then something is interpreted into it that is not the case at all. Yes, but that is the big problem. And we also had a situation two years ago where you got up to 10, then you were beaten, then you also took it. Laughs. Yes, that is the problem. It was a matter of lapidary. Actually yes, ball games then and I regret flight. Was not so well prepared, where you were such things reasonable too little. Things that you can actually solve within a week with insinuations, so not want. I cannot do that. You can always do things like that. The situation and that are things I put. I haven´t won anything. Okay, we do not make agreements anymore. We have regularly the list, but we can work this system in such a training and still partial order have come up again. Look at the organic farm - it still agrees enough colour scheme I do not want to say that except that we know. We have so our plan only dates and we have to put them through therefore. That is the things rather. Yes, we have now times per second so then always have to reinvent that to organize. The child, child go no prescription what one here can I only in between. Can I corrupt 6 times at night and that I would then still huddle. Attempts away, it happens heavenly. You can put consideration here and there. Kind of because at home sometimes rest, constantly swim things through and then work. That works or if you think about it yes, otherwise not and go for it. The pixilation is already a bit planning, because they are and at backup and keep right. One must have a good documentation brain cells Abdurrahman well, then at least suck the samples. I am no longer exactly that my youngest if still but at 5 to 7 sharing. Fix I can me the videos, because I have to. Yes, if one here so or so am I part captured and the hours captured. Then I have copter me like now. I do not find it. I write the giant snakes, but I was not there. Harmony cough but you almost have to blackmail the hours there, teaching assignments, then it is somewhere there trackable. Farmer´s clowns what should not be rewritten? Are just by the way that that and like me. But I am not in favour of it being recorded exactly. Not how to give the such a small cell it I can, I cannot. That one must be every training day whether Schroth must be around taking advantage historically keyword around and then one likes the power now arrives also palacios and done. These are also the important is yes, we have we are looking for new customers. By chance on their search into the fur quite two more people live, and as far as they only a Spaniard. Although only if board farmers for astrophysics and history. Namely your institute do you run process files? We can do. Send me over there tomorrow and in the Maschek advertised was broadcast by me. I think Siebold stands after day tour Minister´s office. The people are mostly children go our doors and mostly physicists who work here in the application. And here are people yes already experienced that they such. Do I really need to write down thoughts that I have and take them home? They are not rare. Really, I have to. I stand. I have to. Look at me. Well, we are for example, whether it is reflected here. However, we must not quite distinguish to continue also in such a way, if one there always so ne thing. Yes, it is now times not only in the ghetto or newer research there.

Appendix E: Interview P2

1. Do you regret not having a contingency plan and do you think it would have been helpful if you had?

If I had had a crisis plan, I would have had to revise it, because it could not apply at all. We have the situation that the closure of the borders has also affected foreign trade within the EU. For example, there were heavy transports on their way to us. They were detained at the Polish border last year because the lorry drivers were not allowed to enter the country. And then we reprogrammed the parts and had them processed somewhere in Poland with a delay. But the delay was less than the waiting time at the border and you can't draw up a plan against something like that. They are like mafia and you just have to deal with them. And that means a new situation every day that you have to adjust to. Many, many conversations, a lot of organization, a lot of reprogramming to get it right. And that's why only experience in crisis management as such and dealing with crisis management as a guideline helps at all. The rest of it cannot be planned.

2. Do you think your company would have been more successful in crisis management if there had been a crisis plan?

No, it could not.

3. As a manager, how did you communicate with your staff during the crisis?

Tried, despite Covid measures, via notices, e-mails, circulars and also personal conversations. And in some cases, simply on a bilateral level. There is no other way with the restrictions of not meeting and still talking. Yes, it is difficult, but it works.

4. Looking back, what would you change about your communication during the crisis?
I would generally introduce earlier that everyone in the team is available the clock, so that such a story could have been organized through google teams earlier.

5. What do you think is important for the resilience of the company in times of crisis?
The most important thing is not to lose courage. Yes, to say once in a while, there is no solution for today. I'll dedicate myself to the task again tomorrow, because otherwise you don't get anywhere in a collection of ideas and that prevents the topic. To come up with some kind of solution. It is important to communicate with many people in order to get as much information as possible before making a decision. The more information you get from somewhere. Even if it is very small. The more likely you are to get an overall picture of what could happen next and to factor that in right away. That is the most important thing.

6. Do you think it would be helpful if there were certain rules for communication and behaviour in the company during a crisis? What do you think should be the most important rules?
Well, first of all, there are rules. Unfortunately, they are not accepted enough by people. The most important rule is that every employee, supervisor or anything else is a human being as an individual and I have to understand that first and be able to imagine where their greatest fears are. So, that I can respond to their fears. When I communicate with them, I can't manage it. Getting these fears out of the way will never be a performance readiness for change.

7. What do you think is more important when it comes to leadership in times of crisis?
Open communication with everyone involved in the crisis and as much communication as possible with people who have also been in crises before. And then the worst thing ever comes from making a business plan that can halfway work.

8. How does your leadership style affect your employees in times of crisis?
That I communicate more closely with them and try to take away their fears. Because what happens? It happens that you send people on short-time work for a longer period of time. And then you have to communicate with them in advance. Because there are also solutions there that can achieve something positive for both sides. And if you explain to people that it is better, for example, that they simply stay at home for two or three months because they get more money in the third month and then have a security that is much better for them than saying "How do you come for two days and go for two days now?" Instead, they should simply be told, "This is now a longer pause. You can take it now because it has advantages for you. "And then you have to look at the legal level, what is the latest that you are getting from politics? What is best for both sides?'' And communicating that and finding the best approach to a solution means many individual discussions and with them you can also get a lot of things in order.

9. What do you expect from your employees in times of crisis?
The most important thing is to listen and understand. Because most people have a problem that they only listen if it hurts them in some way with something. A restriction or anything else and they immediately start looking for arguments why this story doesn't work or that story shouldn't work. Listening is the most important thing, that people listen and

understand what is the issue for the company as a whole. And when they have understood what the general line is, then you can also look for individual solutions for those who are on the margins. Or what is the saying? The survival of the group is more important than the individual and you have to explain that to the people first. And then you have to find the way for the individual.

10. Do you believe that it is easier for groups, for example, to overcome a crisis and why? Yes and no. The issue in a group is everybody has to follow guidelines and everybody has guidelines. But the individual group within that is happening may have to go an absolutely different way to develop for themselves their own strategy for survival than that part of that group. This promotes once because one has a guideline. But it destroys free thinking and can lead to certain areas simply being closed down, eliminated, because they no longer fit into the corporate image and cannot comply with this guideline. The advantage that corporations have is that the bigger the corporation, the more political weight it has. With this political weight, they can draw attention to themselves and seek an individual political solution with support and so on. On the other hand, there is also the issue that the financial organization of a corporate group is more likely to have more financial backing than that of a medium-sized company, which has to work with these funds again and again in its day-to-day business. In addition, however, if a company says that they will not invest for a year, but only do maintenance, then that is a huge sum for them to act with. The SME If it doesn't invest, it has no chance of survival in the future. Then he is gone. Right. So, a steelwork. A large steelwork says I won't invest in a new conveyor system this year, but the conveyor system will do for another two years. It's just that it's been built, and it can cope. But if the medium-sized company doesn't say, I'm not

going to invest in a new plant, then at some point it will be gone because it can no longer operate economically. And that's why they don't have the financial means to deal with these issues. In this respect, after the first wave, which will come at some point now, it will be with him. With insolvencies from the corona stories, there will also be a second wave, namely those who can no longer manufacture economically. And unfortunately, they will only realise this in a few years because they have invested for over two years. They shut themselves out of the market. Murder in instalments. Exactly. And they have only lived on their own substance, which was already pretty badly damaged anyway, because the big companies had already squeezed their prices so much that it just worked. This is particularly bad in the automotive sector, where the dependencies on 2 or 3 large companies are and were so bad that they determined the prices and said, "I can buy at that price. This always leads to the fact that they were able to make their investments for this group over a period of time. If now a new generation of cars is built by someone, which means that new parts are needed and a new production line does not have to be built for this, then the money is no longer there. And then they won't get any more orders and then they're out of the window. That's the fear I have in the next one.

11. Did your employees behave differently in times of crisis?

Yes, in this crisis in particular. Yes. Because everyone was aware that they already had a limitation in their personal life. In this respect, everyone was aware that this is a story that does not affect market conditions, it does not affect us all. But it also had a huge risk behind it, that people said, "I have to restructure my own history now, organise something new. And they also came to us openly and behaved openly and said, "My childcare is not arranged next week. Can I perhaps work reduced hours next week instead of my colleague in order to arrange childcare, even though the plan actually looks different? That was also a new experience, that the environment forced people to actually rethink their child organization through short-time work because of closed day-care centres and schools. And there you could feel a family background more. In the whole story. And everyone tried to find a solution together. The colleague who said from the start, "Sure, next week. Or the man or woman who came said, "I have a problem. I have another solution for her, how we can organise it. That was something new. A crisis that doesn't just affect the economy like in 2009. where all of a sudden, all the financing was gone? No, it is a crisis that has affected us all in all aspects of our lives. And with that, everyone has also realised somewhere that life is a little different in this case. It is a very special story. No one can help it. But we all have to work on a solution to make the environment work halfway.

12. Looking back, would you do more for your company and for your employees in times of crisis?

No, very clear no. Because what we did was the maximum possible. The next story that you would have to think about for the future is How can I already do any questioning in the future selection of employees, even on a crisis-ridden idea of the employee in the future, when hiring?

13. Have you ever denied responsibility to your employees during the crisis?

Yes, I have. Yes, I did. Because at some point I said, as nice as it is with all your problems. But there are things for which there is no solution. We all have to make an effort as a collective to do something. Yes, and I'm no longer responsible for that, because I can't influence it.

14. What do you think is the most used form of communication in small and medium-sized enterprises in Germany between managers and employees?

The conversation.

Appendix F: Interview P3

1. As every company has gone through the crisis in 2020, can you explain how you managed to deal with it. Did you have some kind of crisis plan for situations like this?

No.

2. In your opinion, was your company successful in dealing with the crisis?

Yes and no.

3. Do you regret that you did not have a crisis plan and do you think it would have been helpful?

No, I don't think so. Because the federal government made promises that they could not keep.

4. Do you think your company would have been more successful in crisis management if there had been a crisis plan? And why?

I don't think so, because I couldn't foresee, for example, that one of my major clients would suddenly fire 25 people in 5 months.

5. As a manager, how did you communicate with your staff during the crisis?

In personal conversations. I explained to them in writing how the company was doing and what help we had been promised by the federal government. Nevertheless, I tried to pay the wages on time, although there was hardly any income, I used up all my remaining cash and took on debts for the first time in 15 years.

6. Looking back, what would you change about your communication during the crisis?

I don't think you can change much there because in that case I blame the federal government very much because it allowed the employee to do what he wants. Employee can call in sick by phone without being sick. In that case, the entrepreneur has to be. There is no loss of money for short-time work. If someone is sick, they drop out right away and you haven't made the 10 percent. It didn't go so well.

7. What do you think is important for the resilience of the company in times of crisis?

In my opinion, if you deal well with your staff in good times, if you try to run a company in such a way that you involve the staff and not from above and always bash them, if you deal with people properly, then you have them on your side in a crisis. In some cases, I succeeded very well, in others unfortunately not at all. But the consequence is that it is people with or of foreign origin who have not understood this.

8. Do you think it would be helpful if there were certain rules for communication and behaviour in the company during a crisis? And what do you think should be the most important rule between manager and employee?

I think there is a saying that comes to mind very well. Only those who talk to each other or those who talk to each other can be helped. Just be honest with each other. I think that's the best way I think, even an employee, if he's angry that a short-time worker has to work half a year. If you tell them openly, there are two options: either six months of short-time work or after that the company and the job are no longer there.

9. In your opinion, what is the most important thing when it comes to leadership in times of crisis?

In my company I do it like this. There is a management team. There's a good guy and a bad guy. And I'm always the good guy and the authorized signature is the bad guy. It's just like that! Listening, maybe even with a small gesture or just saying, you can sit down and have a coffee. We try to sort it out. To give help. Sometimes it's not easy.

10. How does your leadership style affect your staff in times of crisis?

I only know it from talking about the time when our major customer locked us out for five months. I very, very rarely got calls from my employees asking about the company, how things were going in the company. How I was doing personally. Others didn't get in touch at all when they were supposed to be back at work. On the contrary, they even called in sick for six and a half weeks. I think it's simply up to the people, how they deal with each other.

11. What do you expect from your staff in times of crisis?

Actually, what you expect from me when times are good. Understanding. Understanding for your personal well-being, but also the well-being of the customer and the well-being of the company and. Unfortunately, this is not so pronounced in everyone.

12. Do you think it is easier for corporations, for example, to manage a crisis and why?

Yes, I think so. Let's take VW for example. VW easily got their 10 per cent short-time margin in and every other worker in Lower Saxony or probably in the whole of Germany couldn't cope with Volkswagen going up to 100 per cent and then creating an annual ring.

This is a slap in the face for every entrepreneur who also works for Volkswagen and has to sell at dumping prices. If you deal with people properly in times of crisis and in normal times, I believe that you will have them on your side even in the worst times. It is definitely easier for bigger companies because the state will always support them, and from supporting one big company, hundreds of SMEs would survive.

13. Did your employees behave differently than usual in times of crisis? And how?
Yes and no. You have to make a very clear distinction. The one who identifies with the company and the one who works and has to, and those are the ones who are horrendously HORRIBLE, who have called up the high sick leave or slashed their holiday full. I am already exhausted.

14. During the crisis, did you ever deny responsibility to your employees?
Never.

15. Looking back, would you do more for your company or for your employees in times of crisis?
This is the second crisis I have experienced in my self-employment. The first was the steel crisis in 2007, when I was told by my major customer one day before Christmas Eve that there would be no more orders from now on. And after two years of self-employment, I should have made 35 people redundant. So, it was one not so good Christmas Eve. And I didn't have the heart to do that. I didn't have the heart to do that this year anyway. In retrospect, would I have done more for employees or for the company? You can - well I did everything I could. I helped some people privately with their finances, which of course

I repaid. I assume that. Others didn't accept any help. Because they are great people. Even though I offered help.

16. And the last question. What do you think is the most used form of communication in small and medium-sized enterprises in Germany between managers and employees?
I think by now it's the telephone and not the face-to-face conversation.

Appendix G: Interview P4

1. As every company has gone through the crisis in 2020, can you explain how they managed to deal with it. Before the crisis, did you have some kind of crisis plan for situations like this?
   No.
2. In your opinion, was your company successful in dealing with the crisis?

Yes, partly. New products developed, staff reduced, short-time allowance. The crisis has so far been managed by many.

3. Do you regret not having a crisis plan? Do you think it would have been helpful?
   That is why every crisis is different. Of course, it is difficult to build a crisis plan. I think so far, we don't have Conakry. We simply have an overproduction crisis that is now being postponed to Corona.
4. Do you think your company would have been more successful in crisis management if there had been a crisis plan? And why?
   Perhaps I can say that I have answered the question thoroughly before. The opinion that crisis can well enter. It is very idle.
5. As a manager, how did you communicate with your staff during the crisis?
   Personally.
6. Looking back, what would you change about your communication during the crisis?
   We came through quite well and there are now all the measures that had been taken. Okay.

7. What do you think is important for the resilience of the company? In times of crisis, liquidity. Flexibility of staff. Management, which is certainly difficult in Germany.
8. Do you think it would be helpful if there were certain rules for communication and behaviour in the company between manager and employee during a crisis? And what do you think should be the most important rule? Whether it would be helpful to give him rules for communication between manager and employee in times of crisis.
   It is important that each employee is deployed according to his or her abilities. Every employee has to be psychologically motivated in a different way, and I think it's difficult to lump them all together.
9. What do you think is the most important thing when it comes to leadership in times of crisis?
   Bringing all staff along and spreading optimism.
10. How does your leadership style affect your employees in times of crisis?
    Hopefully reassuringly.
11. What do you expect from your employees in times of crisis?
    Assertiveness.
12. Do you think it is easier for corporations, for example, to manage a crisis and why?
    Bigger companies are in a better position, because the corporations have more liquidity, can preferably get better money and can reduce their staff more quickly. As for the SME it is important to have liquidity in times of crisis,

flexibility of staff and management is also important, which is certainly difficult in Germany.

13. Did your employees behave differently than usual in times of crisis? The sickness rate has gone down and the willingness to do something new has also gone up.

14. Did you ever deny responsibility to your employees during the crisis? No. Looking back, would you do more for your company or for your employees in times of crisis? Still the same answer We came through quite well and only good liquidity. That there is a certain calm spreading. We invested during the crisis. Which the employees also see and so there is never any calmer in the company.

15. What do you think is the most used type of communication in small and medium-sized enterprises in Germany between managers and employees? The personal conversation.

Appendix H: Interview P5

1. As every company has gone through the crisis in 2020, can you explain how you managed to deal with it. Before the crisis, did you have some kind of crisis plan for situations like this?

No.

2. In your opinion, was your company successful in dealing with the crisis?

No.

3. Do you regret that you did not have a crisis plan and do you think it would have been helpful?

I do. Maybe.

4. Do you think your company would have been more successful in crisis management if there had been a crisis plan and why?

Maybe.

5. As a manager, how did you communicate with your staff during the crisis?

Relatively openly. Honestly. Calmly. And regularly.

6. Looking back, what would you change about your communication during the crisis?

The only thing I would change is that maybe sometimes we took too long to communicate, so faster. Only if you do it faster, you have the problem again that he then maybe didn't have it all figured out.

7. What do you think is important for the resilience of the company in times of crisis?

Dealing with each other, that is, dealing with each other in an orderly manner. I could say understanding. But how much understanding do you want? Yes, above all, solution orientation is important.

8. Do you think it would be helpful if there were certain rules for communication and behaviour in the company between managers and employees during a crisis? And what do you think should be the most important rule or rules?

Yes, so I am in favour of certain rules. The most important one would actually be. A How do I deal with each other? So, above all, not emotionally? Yes, that might also make one. Has an effect on the timing? Yes. Regularity.

9. What do you think is the most important thing when it comes to leadership in times of crisis?

Staying calm is the most important for leadership in times of crisis.

10. How does your leadership style affect your staff in times of crisis?

I would like to skip this question.

11. What do you expect from your staff in times of crisis?

Not to fall into fear, not to make ad hoc decisions.

12. Do you think that it is easier for corporations, for example, to cope with a crisis? And why?

Of course, it is important to have a certain financial background. But if you do not have that, it is because things have not gone so well before. We are very dependent on the fluctuations on the market and we produce every month. For me, resilience is of course also the qualification of the employees, that I have employees who can first replace others. For example, those who are flexible. We also have a situation where not everyone only knows their own job, but there is a lot of exchange among people and they also qualify each other. We actually work with the corporations, probably for the most part, e.g., have such crisis plans, because that is simply demanded by the shareholders and by others who have a say there and that they perhaps even react faster and thereby perhaps not say any.

But at least that immediately drove a different regime. We can drive and rules are enforced. And that the financial resources, for example, are perhaps planned for this, that these are also made available immediately where others are running. Just as we do not look at companies first. Do we have to do this or not? Yes, that is automatically a fact. Now there is a crisis, now we get the funds out and build something or what else do I want to do? Home office. Every computer and so on. That is not quite so easy with us. But whether they really manage the crisis better afterwards, I cannot judge.

13. Did your employees behave differently in times of crisis and how?

Partly. I feel the most important is that people talk to each other more directly, which is perhaps also connected with insecurity, or that people suddenly say things that they push forward to achieve something else, so to speak. Yes, of course, I'll say that. Mood? Yes. Because the private can affect the professional, and the professional can affect the private. Interaction

14. Did you ever deny responsibility to your employees during the crisis? Looking back, would you do more for your company or for your employees in times of crisis?

Would yes, if you knew. What you could do better? That is also the question, what do you get reflected back?

15. What do you think is the most used form of communication in small and medium-sized enterprises between managers and employees in Germany?

Personal conversation. Yes, conversation.

Appendix I: Interview P6

1. As every company has gone through the crisis in 2020, can you explain how you managed to deal with it. Before the crisis, did you have some kind of crisis plan for situations like this?

My company has never been through a crisis until now. We were not prepared for this.

2. In your opinion, was your company successful in dealing with the crisis?

Everything is doing ok so far. I guess we just had luck and reacted well and that will show when the crisis is over.

3. Do you regret not having a crisis plan and do you think it would have been helpful?

Yes and no. So, the crisis plan, that's when we put it in place. And other than that, so you have certain steps that you have to give in any crisis, drive on sight. For example, don't get impatient, let things come to you and then decide what funding opportunities are based on. It's grey.

4. Do you think your company would have been more successful in crisis management if there had been a crisis plan?

Well, general crisis plan, everybody has to have that, I guess. These are the things I have just said in years. But specifically, I don't think it would have been better.

5. As a manager, how did you communicate with your staff during the crisis?

We met weekly on Wednesdays in production and held a meeting there to listen to the concerns and needs of the employees and also openly communicated when short-time work here in Germany was announced. So, open communication. I do not think anyone can set any rules for communication.

6. Looking back, what would you change about your communication during the crisis?

Nothing at all.

7. What do you think is important for the resilience of the company in times of crisis?

Yes, liquidity is the most important thing, and that is not always the case. First of all, you don't know how long it will last - you don't have the crisis and the opportunity to build up activity for a long time. A good working atmosphere, a very good working atmosphere.

8. Do you think it would be helpful if there were certain rules for communication and behaviour in the company between managers and employees during a crisis?

That's something every company has to decide for itself. You can't set any rules. That is... You know.

9. In your opinion, what is the most important thing when it comes to leadership in times of crisis?

Mutual trust. But how often does mutual trust happen?

10. How does your leadership style affect your staff in times of crisis?

I'm relaxed and calm about it, then you will continue to work. Yes, one must not, must not get excited and nervous. Why run around like a chicken and cause stress.

11. What do you expect from your staff in times of crisis?

That if they have problems and hear anything from third parties, that they are just as open to us, that they are adaptable to possible changes in working hours or that they stand by the company.

12. Do you think that it is easier for big companies, for example, to overcome a crisis?

I don't think so. No matter how big you are or whether you are three zeros radio amateur or zero not one, 5,1 or bigger it doesn't matter. You might have gotten help faster. We have seen that. Big companies like Lufthansa - yes, it helps me get that when we go somewhere, but they got help quicker. However, it will be easier for big ones.

13. How did your employees behave differently in times of crisis?

I actually found that the helpfulness from Ghana, to adjust to the different things, be it short-time work or mutiny or whatever. It's the same for the people who have been on short-time work for a longer period of time. They will grumble a bit. Yes, that's what I'm doing. And you have to do justice. So, the real thing is to see that it's our turn again. With short-time work

14. Did you ever deny responsibility to your employees during the crisis?

I don’t think so.

15. In retrospect, you would do more for your company or for your employees in times of crisis.

Nah, I think so too. Is it possible? (laugh)

16. What do you think is the most used form of communication in small and medium-sized enterprises in Germany between managers and employees?

The bulletin board pushes a white board on the direct conversations never. You know what I mean. We do direct conversations here by just getting together at certain intervals, but just sitting places. And I say such a left to the meeting not standing together for a minute, raising problems and asking questions. And that's enough for a very short time without going around.

Appendix J: Interview P7

1. Since every company has gone through the crisis in 2020, can you explain how you managed to deal with it? Before the crisis, did you have some kind of crisis plan for situations like this?

No, definitely not.

2. In your opinion, was your company successful in dealing with the crisis? Yes.

3. Do you regret that you did not have a crisis plan and do you think it would have been helpful?
Not so much.

4.Do you think your company would have been more successful in crisis management if there had been crisis planning? And why?
I don't think so, no.

5. As a manager, how did you communicate with your staff during the crisis? Always at eye level. And we still try to explain everything and disclose what is happening. And we started relatively early to procure protective equipment here and also motivated people to do so or put up notices everywhere and what else was done. So, now for the crisis, we were certainly one of those who made an effort above the average. Yes, that's what we have to hold up here. I estimated that it would not be over tomorrow. It won't be over in three weeks, so it was clear to me that we would have to live with it. With the staff member, that sometimes also takes a little longer

until he has realised that. But we still didn't do anything with coercion. We have reasonable employees here. Sometimes it takes a little longer and we really just want short answers.

6. Looking back, what would you change about your communication during the crisis?

Actually, nothing. Not much. Hardly anything will happen right away. We have always used this room here for meetings, just as I actually built it or had it built so large here and left it free for this purpose. So, our 35 employees can fit in here without further ado. And I put a speech analysis here, a microphone, so that I don't have such a loud voice or get in trouble slowly with emails when I have to speak so loudly. That's why I built it and that's what we practised here. And I have always described the current situation to the staff several times a year. And yes, and what we have to do better and what went wrong. So, as I said, I put my cards on the table. That is always my goal. I didn't hide anything. Of course, I didn't tell everything either. But as far as the staff inside are concerned and what really makes sense, that's what I've tried to do here. Last year, and two years ago, we had the staff surveyed by a company, i.e. by an authorised yes. That's the only way to learn something like that. And back then, two years ago, we already had him, who now evaluates it with points, tables and everything, as I said, a good company never has. And this time, it was a joke. We did it again, we were even better then. Can I show you how I do the printouts on that. Yeah, it is. He's never had anything like this before.

7. That's something to be very proud of. What do you think is important for the resilience of the company in times of crisis?

Yes, of course it's important to have a certain financial background. But if you don't have that, it's because things haven't gone so well before. We are very dependent on the fluctuations on the market and we produce every month. That depends on how the orders are, of course. And whether they are orders that earn a lot or not. You can't plan all that. That's why we don't make a plan that says we want to achieve too much this month. We always try to achieve the best. But that doesn't always work out if the order situation isn't suitable. And that is still important at first. Of course, if you have a bad financial situation, as I said, you can hardly change it. So, yes, this year we also took out this Schleck loan for 500,000 euros out of fear. Now we still have in the bank, like us, that we don't have there. Yes, they didn't attack either. We don't have to. And we only got this and this other help for 25,000 euros before. We've already paid that back now. Voluntarily. Because we said we couldn't prove that we needed it. Rainer Angst Yes, because that's always the case. Such actions are subsidies. There is the Winton principle, yes, you have to be a service provider, otherwise you can just forget it. And that's why we actually did it out of fear, almost without reason. It's actually the question of who is now already… For me, resilience is of course also the qualification of the employees, that I have employees who can first replace others. For example, those who are flexible. We also have a situation where not everyone only knows their own job, but there is a lot of exchange among people and they also qualify each other. We do a lot with computer technology here and I don't know any programmes and that's why we've done a kind of training course here in the company once or twice and again we sent away relatively few people and they taught each other the rest. In daily practice. Yes, that's also a backbone for me when I know they can do it. But that's all I can think of right now.

8. That was already a lot. Do you think it would be helpful if there were certain rules for communication and behaviour in the company between the manager and the employee during a crisis? And what should perhaps be the most important rule?
I don't think it's realistic that you can do something like that. At all and that is then carried out is not realistic. That's why there should be no such thing. That is that. That has to stop.

9. What do you think is more important when it comes to leadership in times of crisis?

To be an example as a leader, for example, that one constantly makes an effort in a company, that is the way it is anyway, that I spend most of my time here or that I lead the way here with protective measures. That I do it myself, that I do not just demand from others something that I am not doing. We have staff surveys and people have certain trust before a crisis, as a leader I am trying to remain that trust during the crisis. Leaders must treat everyone with respect, and to respect that everyone sometimes has difficulties, even when the company is dealing with the crisis.
The employees already have a certain trust. They also say that and that is also reflected in these staff surveys. That is precisely what they see as very positive. No, unfortunately we had to cut back last year because we no longer had a meeting here. I didn't feel like sitting here with 30 people in the room. Yes, even if the windows are open, but they sit here and infect each other, not me, and that's why we didn't do it and I still tried to talk to the staff. But then, of course, you don't approach the staff all the time and tell them what you always do at a distance. Yes, that's not whether it will stay that way forever, that people will change a bit. But yes, that was actually the basis for the employees to pull along, even if it was sometimes difficult or, for example, they had to do short-time work.

They also suffered certain losses. No one resisted it at the time. Although we have to get everyone to sign. Yes, that we can now do short-time work, that we can do short-time work, that they agree to it. However, we have again paid compensation for the loss. That can be done. That could, that wasn't the case before either, I think. So, we have from. That increases the short-time allowance at our expense. That's not 100 per cent that's coming. But what you got in addition, which is permissible.

10. What do you expect from your employees in times of crisis?
Trust and that they have the confidence. There is no other way. A staff When you see crisis, of course you are afraid. We need the we need trust from the leadership at. The leadership is not so far from the level. So, the leadership is actually always lower level among the people here. So, like it is nice and also itself was the machine or so it was yes. Of course, I think that's very good too. I used to do that a lot more. And yes, I always thought that was good, that I tried just as hard as they did to create something and to achieve something. That of course you can achieve much more at the office, at the desk, if you do it properly. They don't see it that way. They don't understand it that way. But I have always accepted that and done it because I enjoyed it. Yes, that was actually the balance for me. But I don't know if that was still the question.

11. Do you think it is easier for corporations, for example, to manage a crisis? And why?
We actually work with the corporations, probably for the most part, e.g., have such crisis plans, because that is simply demanded by the shareholders or I don't know by whom and by others who have a say there and that the perhaps even react faster and thereby perhaps not say an. react. But at least that immediately drove a different regime. We can drive and

rules are enforced. And that the financial resources, for example, are perhaps planned for this, that these are also made available immediately where others are running. Just as we don't look at companies first. Do we have to do this or not? Yes, that is automatically a fact. Now there is a crisis, now we get the funds out and build something or what else do I want to do? Home office. Every computer and so on. That's not quite so easy with us. But whether they really manage the crisis better afterwards, I can't judge. Audio You have certainly created the conditions for that.

12. Did your employees behave differently than usual in times of crisis?
Not really.

13. Did you ever deny responsibility to your employees during the crisis?
No.

14. Looking back, would you do more for your company or for your employees in times of crisis?
Not like Ms. XY, perhaps, that you didn't take into account when you thought of what you had to do too late. But we haven't done anything wrong yet.

15. What do you think is the most used type of communication in small and medium-sized enterprises between manager and employee in Germany?

The personal conversation may not be like that everywhere! Otherwise, actually. I used to publish a small company guide. I thought that was very good. This sometimes saved me a big meeting and then I wrote everything down on two sheets of paper or something.

And then I really did issue two sheets every quarter. Or if it became more. I just made another small technology magazine. The employees have to be up to date with the latest tools, technology and machine technology. And most of them hardly read anything these days. And so I picked out what I had read in trade journals, including technical ones, and picked out the important things that apply exactly to us and approved them or wrote something about them myself and photographed photos and tried to explain to the staff what we have here as the essence of what I have found out so that they can read it in a relatively short way, yes. So, in summary, I also did it once. Yes, the manager here who did the survey also thought so. To have the small business drunk that everyone does something like that. But I did. I also liked to do a bit of graphics, as should mostly still be done at home. When I came home after work at some point, I liked to design a bit of something like that and that's why I liked to try my hand at it. At the moment, I haven't done anything else that I want to do.

Appendix K: Pilot Interview

1. Since every company has gone through the crisis in 2020, can you explain how you managed to deal with it? Before the crisis, did you have some kind of crisis plan for situations like this?

In principle, we were not prepared for this kind of crisis. Because a pandemic situation like the one we have now did not exist before. As a result, in principle, I don't have a plan that I could follow. We have tried to keep our nerve, we have tried to serve our customers equally well, we have tried to position ourselves even more broadly and in various branches of the economy, and we have tried to continue to serve certain market segments that are relatively independent of crises, in part also market segments that serve the public interest, and thus to generate sustainable capacity utilization.

2. In your opinion, was your company successful in dealing with the crisis?

We have done everything to first of all ensure the conditions in the company, we have done everything that I would say the public sector, or the state expects on the basis of the specifications, and we have also tried to comply with these distance rules in our dealings with customers, suppliers and employees in order to simply avoid infections within the company. I believe that bigger companies are coping with the crisis better. Not all corporations are the same. It's always a question of which is closer to politics. That is difficult to generalize. When I see what large corporations like Volkswagen or Lufthansa receive in the way of subsidies, which in principle pass through them unscathed even in the event of a huge slump in sales, it's quite frightening. And I simply believe that corporations belong to the lobbyist community. That they sometimes have different opportunities than small businesses. SMEs get a lot of promises there. But if they do, they can only help themselves. Probably.

3. Do you regret that you did not have a crisis plan? Do you think it would have been helpful?

I think a plan is meant to be broken. I simply believe that crisis situations are very complex and very diverse, and a general crisis plan would not have helped me in these situations. You have to try to think in the short term and adjust to the individual situation accordingly and try to take certain measures operationally for the benefit of all involved.

4. Do you think your company would have been more successful in crisis management if there had been crisis planning?

I don't think so. No.

5. What do you think is important for the resilience of the company in times of crisis?

First of all, it's important to have a stable workforce, then a relatively stable customer environment, which of course has a lot to do with luck. The lucky knack of working with the right partners, who are also financially potent, is also important. I would say that in crisis and vulnerable niche markets, good infrastructure and a good working atmosphere are important.

6. Do you think it would be helpful if there were certain rules for communication and behaviour in the company between the manager and the employee during a crisis?

Yes. I think so.

7. What would be the most important rule for you?

Let me put it this way. Communication is important in the company. In principle, we always try to inform colleagues about new findings, about the latest events, without unsettling them. Tell colleagues the truth, show them perspectives. One must not neglect the fact that unstocked fears also have a negative influence on the work performance or the work result and try to convey a certain minimum of sovereignty and security to the colleagues.

8. What do you think is more important when it comes to leadership in times of crisis?

I believe in keeping one's nerves, keeping a cool head, not making any hasty decisions, first waiting, drinking tea and looking and then, when the time comes, reacting surgically. Anything else, any hasty reactions usually do not lead to a good result. That's my opinion.

9. How does your leadership style affect your staff in times of crisis?

I hope positive.

10. What do you expect from your employees in times of crisis?

That you implement our guidelines conscientiously and that you keep your nerve just like the management and do not try to spread any conspiracies, misinformation and thus also gloat.

11. Did your employees behave differently than usual in times of crisis?

I would say, in general, hold no different. That's exactly who gave it to their work tasks. They didn't have much space, much opportunity to think. The work was there like that. And if, let's say, there was uncertainty somewhere or there was a need to talk, then I tried to clarify and discuss that relatively quickly.

12. There, during the crisis, you ever denied responsibility towards your employees.

No.

13. Looking back, would you do more for your company or for your employees in times of crisis?

No.

14. What do you think is the most used type of communication in small and medium-sized enterprises between manager and employee in Germany?

Through the spoken word. Personal.

Appendix L: Interview P9

1. As every company has gone through the crisis in 2020, can you explain how you managed to deal with it. Before the crisis, did you have some kind of crisis plan for situations like this?

We could have taken the plan from Stuttgart, as we did. Also, it brought us optimism, if nothing else, as well as feel of some “security”. Not every company has gone through the crisis last year, I would say that the medical companies flourished. They didn’t need a pandemic crisis plan this time.

2. In your opinion, was your company successful handling the crisis?

We were not, we are still trying, and I think we will be successful. It is still a crisis if you ask me.

3. Do you regret not having a prepared crisis plan in advance? And do you think it would have been more helpful?

For the pandemic, especially, I think that if all companies had a pre-crisis plan, the crisis would have a lower impact on all of us, and probably the numbers of infected would be lower, as well. But, unfortunately, we didn’t think of this. We had a lot of offers, but we had problem with material delivery and with production of the company. So, my answer is that the pandemic plan would have been helpful if we had it in advance, but also, I cannot plan for all of the companies I am working with. Also, a lot of employees took the sick leave and that made a problem.

4. Do you think your company would have been more successful in crisis management if there had been a crisis plan?

As I said before, we got the crisis plan after the pandemic started, so we could have managed somehow. Although, I think that we should all have pre-crisis plans for future.

5. As a manager, how did you communicate with your staff during the crisis?

I tried to communicate as open as possible. information would have been communicated directly to employees via notices, so to speak. Sometimes it was not possible to be completely open, because as a leader, I couldn’t allow myself to look weak, because that would have mean that the company became weaker. In my opinion, I think that if the leader is looking bad, the company is also looking bad. If the leader is shaken, then the company is also shaken.

6. Looking back, what would you change about your communication during the crisis?

I don’t think that I would change anything.

7. What do you think is important for the resilience of the company in times of crisis?

We need to have work to do, to begin with. Without work, no matter pandemic, it’s crisis itself. So, well prepared contracts, liquidity and good communication with employees.

8. Do you think it would be helpful if there were certain rules for communication and behaviour in the company between manager and employee during a crisis?

We had certain measures, and rules – and reactions of my employees were going from panic to intelligent ignorance.

9. What do you think is the most important when it comes to leadership in times of crisis?

To motivate people to work and to get out of their “thinking loop”, and then, of course to have everything under control, as much as possible.

Appendix M: Interview P10

1. As every company has gone through the crisis in 2020, can you explain how you managed to deal with it? Before the crisis, did you have some kind of crisis plan for situations like this?

Yes, we have a pandemic crisis plan. But we made it when we realized that there was a pandemic or that it was coming. Yes, of course. But nevertheless, there is a pandemic plan from Stuttgart that has to be applied to the companies. So, we didn't create it ourselves, but we took over the existing one from Stuttgart and adapted it to our company. The adaptation was relatively quick because it was very global. But all the essential points were immediately available to us. But we didn't think about such things in advance, because we always optimistically assume that what has been can be continued in a positive way. I think that's in our nature. One then simply sounds out such negative things. So, there are sectors of the economy or pressure area 2 like the supplier industry, I'll say for food and pharmaceuticals. For them it is an Audi component of the customer. The pandemic plan to run an existing pandemic plan. That's more like submitting the future and handling the supply chains. That's a fact, of course. Important. If I have to secure the production of medicines and so on with my company, for example, I also have to secure the production in the event of a crisis in the war or else what. That's why I had to do it, because I used to work in the pharmaceutical industry before. But we went in quite mentally unprepared. Who could have been mentally prepared for this?

2. In your opinion, was your company successful in dealing with the crisis?

I think that we are dealing with the crisis very successful.

3. Do you regret not having a crisis plan prepared in advance? Do you think it would have been helpful?

Well, we had one right after the crisis started. But you could only drive on sight. There, the best plans are of no use now. So, right now, we have to always react according to the current situation. What would have happened if, for example, we had significantly fewer orders? After all, if we had only been able to get orders through traditional sales as before? We have also been very lucky in this. It is simply a matter of chance and luck. In addition, we as a company were not hit directly by the staff. So, in the end, almost no one was sick and it may well be from that. I had a very high level of sick leave in the company before the pandemic officially started, in January and February 2020. We were really affected ourselves. We had many cases where we didn't know why, and the doctor actually just said flu. Flu-like symptoms. What this now has to do with the other and with Covid 19 is relatively unclear. Maybe it is the reason why we here in the region of Sachsen Anhalt are so little affected by it – because we had it before?

4. Do you think your company would have been more successful in crisis management if there had been a crisis plan?

I guess so, on the one hand, and on the other hand, in retrospect, nothing major would have changed if the situations had remained the same. Everything else will be conjecture and I assume that through a high degree of improvisation skills the company will be able to master the situation even without a pandemic plan. But that is individual. You need flexible minds, lateral thinking, minds that can master this through improvisation and control, that can take action depending on the situation.

5. As a manager, how did you communicate with your staff during the crisis?

Open and holistic. All the necessary information was directly forwarded to the staff via notices and without hesitation. The acceptance of the measures and crisis by the people was very, very controversial. There was a wide range, from panic to intelligent ignorance. It has been observed. That was something new for many people. A very interesting one in the sense of "Oh, we're going to get some extra free time now". The same thing. All this short-time (Kurzarbeit) work at the beginning was interesting to some of the employees. I, myself, can also take part. That's about it. And then comes a point. At some point it gets on your nerves and you're glad when it's over. And that is also communication. When it comes to the home office - at first, they're all fired up, but when it gets really serious or has been serious for a while, they're fed up. So, it's a new experience for many and a new experience also brings new insights. And my country appreciates what was before. It definitely changed. So, the current pandemic, the way it's being done right now, definitely changes a whole behaviour towards each other. Also, the attitude towards work. Some of them think “I don't need all this at all”. And the willingness to work decreases for the majority of the employees. The willingness to work, which they had before, drops quite a lot with many or most of the employees. They are saying: “But I only do what is necessary, I don't know what tomorrow will bring” - and so they have completely lost their future goals. Because you can always count on it. Now I'm at home and that's not bad either, because I can't do anything. So, they can cope with the little they have and then motivate them to do more. Then they're caught in their so-called thinking loop and it's incredibly difficult to get them out again. Well, that's not only supposed to happen to the staff, but also to everyone. It is general mood, the whining. And I agree, because it's just such a depressive mood, depressive moods in society as a whole. So, I understand that you can get out. You can't. I don't know. When you live here in the countryside, it's all easier. Somehow, the people with high improvisation possibilities will get through this crisis without psychological damage.

6. Looking back, what would you change about your communication during the crisis? With your staff?

Methodology or content?

Both.

Pass on less information. Because a lot of information that is understandable for us, it is sometimes not understandable for the stuff. And they had an overview. It is ok if those do not allow themselves to be instrumentalized. But on Monday everyone was in a panic. But we are all obliged to implement the law and so you are part of the regime. But you can also see that in people and that puts it into perspective all by itself. When I think about it, in the first pandemic phase, even friends and acquaintances of ours, where I felt like I was hitting my head, they had a sign on their door. We're staying at home. They came here. Friends with whom we were in the car park. Please stay away. And they were so panicked. They sent out for food. That's really terrible. Extremely.

7.

What do you think is important for the resilience of the company in times of crisis?

Employee loyalty and employee identification with the company.

8. Do you think it would be helpful if there were certain rules for communication and behaviour in the company between managers and employees during a crisis?

Yes. But they should always exist, even without a crisis. Those are the flaws that we have, they have to be eliminated. The crisis leads us to see that clearly, because the flaws are there, too. They are just more visible during the crisis. Because when that is going on, one always tends to let it go easily.

9. What do you think is the most important when it comes to leadership in times of crisis? It depends on the nature of the problem. So, if I have problems with the employee, then the leadership, that is the carrot and stick, the stroking and the driving. Important when it comes to economy, it's about looking at how I can save the company, for example, or bring it through the crisis by building up capacities. If I have a financial problem, I look at how I can get support. And in all these areas, networks are always important, i.e. the contacts you have. And if you have good concepts, you can't generalize. Leadership. If the leadership is already shaky, then all change as well. It's like I am the image role model and I'm insecure of myself. Then I clearly and unambiguously transfer that to the others. We can now also see, for example, that transferring insecurities is portrayed as weakness in the general population or also in the company. And if a leadership position presents weakness to the outside world, it is no longer followed. So, people will no longer follow him, and thus the leader of an organization, people, a company, an area, never mind what, loses his credibility. As a leader, you can't sit in the corner drooling. For the sake of God's word. You have to be able to do something and have ideas, to think laterally without being a lateral thinker. And that's what people feel. Whether there are people who have answers to questions and who also roll up their sleeves. I also see that as important. And taking employees seriously as people with their fears.

10. How does your leadership style affect your employees in times of crisis? Have there already been any responses?

In times of crisis, employees should have the trust in leader and “follow” him.

11. How many employees do you have?

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12. What do you expect from your employees in times of crisis?

Loyalty and integration as well as identification with the company and what they do. And trust.

13. Do you think that it is easier for corporations, for example, to cope with a crisis?

Yes, but it doesn’t certainly have to be easier. Just imagine, you are a leader of a big corporation and you have to let off 8000 people because of a crisis. That's probably not less stressful than, for example, eight people. It is not just about the company; it is also about the people.

14. Did your employees behave differently than usual in times of crisis?

Yes. And insecurity made them lethargic, aimless...

15. Did you ever deny responsibility to your staff during the crisis?

Denied? We have no responsibility for the crisis, but a leader will never deny a responsibility for his staff. A clear no.

16. Looking back, would you do more for your company or for your employees in times of crisis?

If we had the financial possibility, financially? Yes, that is, if the company had the financial possibility to do so. Financially, humanly, psychologically and physically. Absolutely. We have done a lot for our employees by having enough work. During the crisis, that should be the most important thing. So, we have created the conditions so that everyone can continue to pay for their "bread and butter" and there are not many people on short-time work. That is good preparatory work. Don't misunderstand If you keep your work healthy. Without work, the body and the mind atrophy. I think we've done some good groundwork together in the past few years and it's paid off now in the times of crisis. It wasn't just the good Lord that sorted something out for us; we did it. But we were also lucky. You just have to be, that's part of it.

17. What do you think is the most used way of communication in small and medium-sized enterprises between manager and employee in Germany?

Personal conversation

Appendix P: Interview P11

1. As every company has gone through the crisis in 2020, can you explain how you managed to deal with it. Before the crisis, did you have some kind of crisis plan for situations like this?

Not at all. So, you can actually say I can now also refer back to the experience of Freud Siemens. That's where I dealt with security. So, that means pandemics, terror, civil wars, ultimately. Yes, natural disasters, such stories on a piece of paper, for the construction sites and also for locations worldwide over 33 globally distributed locations. What happens if one of those sites ended up there due to explosions, war, whatever? Planes on it on the site. What happens? There was a so-called Business Continuity Plan. Every plant had to do the planning. Where was I out of office technically. Where do I get my IT infrastructure back quickly? What about data backup? With us, for example, that is also the case. We have two parts of the building, in one is the tape, there is the server. So, if one burns down, it's not gone in the sense of such things. Then there are eight. The people have four notebooks and they are supposed to take them with them. At that moment, since it became public, they all said your thing. If the authorities close this thing down, at least you'll still be able to work. Everyone has a VPN line and everyone has a notebook here, so regardless of the crisis, that was already the case, yes, I have now hung up, where the changeover was, that you can work from this, from this consideration of business continuity planning. And then I really thought about what these scenarios were that we had on our minds in the Group - a pandemic in Germany or a global one. So, in all friendship, no. And I think that at some point, even if you had presented that, you would have had a board of directors. That is now scenario A, B, C, D etc. As I said, it's starting to spin. So, both have to stay in reality. You don't have that. I experienced SARS in China when I was on the road for the hospitality. So, that's why I made some kind of comparison. The year is not comparable at all. It was relatively local, relatively localised. You can also look at Ebola in Africa. It is not spreading because there is little interaction. But now we have a completely different interaction in China. So, every day, every major airline has two or three flights to several cities in this huge empire, and every company that thinks it's something has an exchange with it, and of course, bang, it was like that all over the world, you could actually do that. There was no blueprint for it. You can't say you have a plan for it either. The situation was when that started. Then I started thinking about what kind of effects it could have, what it would become. Everyone gets infected, then everyone comes. Or there is a case in the company quarantine. We have a contact with the so decide its the company. What did we do? We then said that all people from the day of the home office onwards should take boxes with them where there are signs of the disease, so that the people already have the things with them, so that they don't have to come here first, but if they have symptoms, they have the thing with them and can then work from home or have suspected cases in the area and cure them. Now, of course, we are lucky enough to have a lot of space somewhere here, so we have it on shift. The people distribute again. All that was already a countermeasure that was also in place. Yes, and then from time to time, maybe in three- or four-months' time, maybe also a larger meeting with a distance between the national authorities, simply telling them where the hammer is hanging and how things are going. What that means for us on the job, what is important now? And so on. What one cultivates a bit of communication. Too little in my opinion. On the other hand, this is also contrary to the risk of infection. So, what do you do right now? And there's no Mark. I couldn't just look at my Siemens documents and say, "Now crisis plan B“. I'll do like this and like that. I'll do this and that. Was there actually no one?

2. In your opinion, was your company successful in dealing with the crisis?

So, at least we were. We were always able to work. Yes, going through quite a time. We had almost no Infection failures. It was only in the second wave that we had three. Them. But they just occurred in the company group, in the Rhineland area, the photographer stayed at home, still the instruction. So, in this respect I have to say, the distance to the old truths, no meetings. By the way, I also put Mrs. XYZ with the copy. Like a co-worker. Yes, she's in there too. She's not? What does that mean? Now I wrote two emails, one before the first wave and one before the second wave. You can probably get them. I'll say, we'll do that one now.

3. Do you regret not having a crisis plan? And do you think it would have been helpful?

Well, I'll say crisis plan, I had a bit of experience in my head. Not for such a scenario, of course, because no one expected that. Yes, helpful. I think that for companies that don't necessarily have someone who has dealt with security in the group with such scenarios, they would be well advised to go through various things.

Of course, how do you get the idea that I should have a laptop in each of the two parts of the building and so on? How do I get the idea that I wrote what I wrote? That is of course from the time. So, who a company that hasn't done something like that somewhere or where no one has done it, would be well advised to look into it and get good advise and stand around. That's not so wrong. You always underestimate your own knowledge. But that comes from somewhere. You have to have it somewhere.

4. Do you think that companies here would have been more successful in crisis management if there had been crisis planning?

Well, I don't see anything now where we can do anything differently, if I don't see anything now where we have omitted something somewhere that has led to damage to be relearned.

5. As a manager, how did you communicate with your staff during the crisis?

Regular meetings on the general weather situation, then of course also individually, when you walk through the halls, you are talking to people, then they also talk to each other again. So, I don't just sit here in the box, but also talk about points. I have to hold a big meeting now, but I also exchange ideas with individual working groups. I'll do that. In this respect. The stand is a permanent traffic jam.

6. Looking back, what would you change about your communication during the crisis?

Well, I'd say there are two things that are there. On the one hand, you talk to people, communicate something, that possibly triggers in them what you want to say and possibly also somewhere it stirs up rumours and there is probably also somewhere a third of people, which is anyway. So, it's only this third interpretation of the Third World, somehow a third, that is enthusiastic. One third. They do their job by the book and have already resigned. And I would say that this also triggers something somewhere. And so it's difficult to say that one does X, Y and Z in the intervals and that has an effect. I just think it's yes. It's more of an attempt. It remains an attempt and you hope that you somehow address the right thing with the right words, that you trigger the right thing in people and in those who say they are enthusiastic about it. Will it perhaps be an incentive, give a bit of direction to those who have inwardly resigned? It's in here, out there and all nonsense anyway. And that's where it all goes down. I'll do it. That's just likely. It can't be controlled.

7. What do you think is important for the resilience of the company in times of crisis?

Resilience. Now the question is, in what relationship with several levels after. So, I think the most important thing is that somewhere the team pulls together, because only then can you achieve the best possible goals or still turn things around. We have had accidents in the middle of the year, where people really pulled out all hours of the day and night and even at the weekend in 30 degree heat. It was about a bunker in the material bunker for divers, the world's largest and furnace builder at Thyssen Krupp, steel, also one of the world's largest blast furnaces, which were then equipped with new material charging facilities. They built it and then we got parts delivered, too late and not properly. And so on. So, that was the problem. And these parts had to be delivered.

Girardin had to be changed, adjusted, corrected and so on. And then the time for assembly became shorter and shorter. Actually, it was already impossible. And then we really stepped on the gas and realised that people could and wanted to. Absolutely. But it also presupposes that you are there yourself as a leader. So, I was here until late at night. Saturday, Sunday, getting pizza over there. It looked like after a bomb attack. Always. There were the people from WoT with them. Foremen, all locked together. So, customer, engineers foreman and locksmith from me in a room thinking How do we get it there now? And so on. But you really have to play an active role. So, then you go home and expect that everything will be fine by chance at the weekend. It's not there. So, there they are. Well, the whole thing has to be managed.

8. Do you think it would be helpful if there were certain rules for communication and behaviour in the company between manager and employee during a crisis? What do you think should be the most important rule?

It's as diverse as the people. At the end of the day. The question is, yes - communication model, listening times sender and receiver. How do I deal with the diversity of the receiver? There are people who need guidance, strict discipline. And there are others who prefer to be left to their own creative devices and given guidelines. And you have to assess that. In this respect, I would not consider such a tight line to be sensible. In the group, I would say, it is then again the case that a certain culture is formed. So, of course I'm allowed to do it the way the board has it on the way, the shirt collar open brim. The belly is the reason that from life and its very buttoned up, but anyway all standing at attention. So, and then I'll just say does that continue downwards somewhere? Or is there of course the question of unwritten laws of discipline and of how should I say, the behaviour of the staff towards the next level, that you have a certain trait in there, somewhere, automatically, that there are simply levels through these, through these ranks, which are of course extremely flat with us. And then you still try, I would say, to stimulate creativity and the team feeling, somehow open or the "we-feeling" somewhere, that you leave people a little bit free, so that they are not moving within a rigid framework, but between two guard rails. That was always the case with Freud. The philosophy and the how don't talk to those on the next level. That was a thing that regulated itself somewhere between the lines.

9. And how does your leadership style affect your staff in times of crisis?

Well, I think self-critically one has to say that. It is precisely here that people are really looking for guidance and orientation. So, I think that here I rather come from this friend context, where you say the employee is doing something. He also wants to develop and he wants to go to Brazil hydroelectric power plant X, Y, Z and so on then into the next role and had career ambitions, which as a rule somewhere. Then here it is already the case that they say yes to him. So, my feeling is that you have to take more of a hand in it, give more salary, which I don't want at all. I think the right and proper race is to give orders and instructions and to control them. It is to say I give tasks and goals and then, when I give tasks and goals, I can also act independently. And I say even as an entrepreneur, a company is still worth something if I'm not there. It still works. Yes, it makes no sense to have something where people all stand at attention, three times a day every day and you come, you turn around all wrong. And that’s got better in you. Let’s just say that this old GDR style and tight regime from the past is still in here. So, I will just say that I think I'm taking the right approach. But whether that was always the right thing to do here in every phase, I dare to doubt. But I am nevertheless of the opinion that it is. It must go in that direction. But that is independent of the crisis now. But in the crisis, it’s the same. I suppose it's necessary to say that they're sitting on it during the crisis. What if they had only been led before? The last eight years I am command and obedience. Let them fall on the wings at home in Rome and do nothing or nothing right or say and then applaud. In every screw, a question and decision, someone had to decide who all times. When and for what did you pay? That was always my saying. Someone would have to take the place of someone else and so on. And that has changed. And I think that's why we were still winning terrain even in the crisis. So, what happened here and still, so and so you have to see it, I think so.

10. How many employees do you have?

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11. What do you expect from your employees in times of crisis?

A goal orientation, result orientation and flexibility. Yes, because it is the only thing that is a constant now, that every day somehow brings different challenges.

12. Do you think it is easier for corporations, for example, to manage a crisis? And why?

I don't think so. So, in the end, there are people everywhere who act and who can be managed well or badly. So, it's no different in the group. How small Even within the group there are those and those. I have also experienced at Bilfinger, so there was a management clique in other groups areas management style. So, little. That's not. It's also difficult in the Siemens Group, says Flöten. You can give a direction somewhere. A vision, statement, goals. What does the company stand for? What do you exemplify as a board member? And then there is the next level, namely the vision, which then pleases and or the vision. We have learnt from companies where there is a prince who says, "But woe betide you if you do here and so on, or what I say here is done. And keeps everything more or less under wraps. And others say No, we'll see to it that we communicate here and act with each other and take that in and life is not like that. So, that's, depending on what we're up to again. It goes right down to the department. There are companies where it can be like this and like that, there are departments in the companies where it can be like this and like that. So, it can be. But I am of the opinion that when I see a PEUT like this, it has been relatively consistent. I liked the culture that developed there. So, that's on a small scale, I think. Of course, it's easy for them because the fewer employees there are, the more directly they can talk to them and make selections. So, we have another rusty red and say, and I'm catching myself again, one that is somehow more in that direction.

13. Did your employees behave differently than usual in times of crisis? And how?

So, my impression was like that. Now I don't think it's only in this company, so of course people also have certain existential fears about what's behind it, that the rumour mill is bubbling. Alibis, insecure work, the resulting dissatisfaction. That's the way it is...

14. During the crisis, did you ever deny responsibility to your employees?

No.

15. Looking back, would you do more for your company or for your employees in times of crisis?

I don't see any approach now where I would have made subsidies, I couldn't change the ABC or something like that. Which doesn't mean that it wouldn't exist.

16. In Germany, what do you think is the most used type of communication in small and medium-sized enterprises between managers and employees?

I claim that the conversation is more direct, more personal, it is better. I want corporations for many meetings and many mails, but rather one goes now earlier here around the corner, before I write a mail, I just went into the office. Yes, the other way around, many employees you observe inside like to have more tension, to secure themselves. I'm the kind of person who says you should talk a bit and make small talk, just to promote a bit of a "we" feeling. Yes, especially at this time.

17. I have to ask an additional question. You would have said that you formulated emails. But how did you reach your staff on the machine? Or do you have a mobile phone or a procrastinator who posts such notices?

Office drying for the staff outside that it is then the responsibility of the production manager to power the shift schedule. I think, then say that so the people are distributed in two shifts on the road to the halls, that what we can do there is not actually there, that with it already slain.

18. And the manufacturing climber ultimately responsible for communication?

Yes. Then also form with the people every day. Yes, and assign them to work or talk to them directly. And they also have a good feeling that this reflects exactly what they want and want to push forward. And that would have another conversation more for me.

Appendix R: Interview P12

1. As every company has gone through the crisis in 2020, can you explain how you managed to deal with it. Before the crisis, did you have some kind of crisis plan for situations like this?

Clearly no.

2. In your opinion, was your company successful in dealing with the crisis?

Yes, and for that reason only it is still existing.

3. Do you regret not having a crisis plan? And do you think it would have been helpful?

Having a plan is always helpful in general, yes. And having a plan for situations that you don't really want and you also think will never happen to you is even more important. And you are even more successful in the end when you do have the plan? Yes, for sure.

4. Do you think your company would have been more successful in crisis management if there had been a crisis plan and why?

Yes, that is a yes. So, the question arises, I think, from outside or not at all. Without knowing what to do. So, that was at the right time. Can only be an advantage. And that already results in one's plan one way or another. One is simply safer or more secure.

5. As a manager, how did you communicate with your staff during the crisis?

Less about digital media. Actually, yes. Were there times when there was no change, because we didn't set up a home office system, but because of the space structure, we were able to actually keep the job going while adhering to the rules of the AHA rule, as they're called. So, the face-to-face conversation was easy.

6. Looking back, what would you change about your communication during the crisis?

The yes actually already refers to the first question about having a plan, if I don't have a plan, but actually have to develop a plan operationally. I am forced to develop operationally, so I only react and I act, then that is not very good per se. And I would want to avoid that at all costs or completely for a next, a next situation that is to be assessed similarly. And that's why we will certainly work on such a crisis management, a crisis plan. Anyway, I don't know how yet, but something has to happen.

7. What do you think is important for the resilience of the company in times of crisis?

The hard and soft factors are, of course, that you equip yourself with the appropriate composure and avoid falling into any form of minor or even major panic. So, clearly, the greatest chance to simply find inner serenity, which lies in calmness, to start thinking out of calmness and to find areas of action that will help you to get through this crisis in the best possible way.

8. And the hard factors?

The hard factors are that I have to be everything in the company. In my case, I wouldn't necessarily know that, because I've looked at the topic when it has to be crisis, I don't always have something to do with pandemics. That's why it's hard to say now what hard instruments I would have to have. So, I would have to have this metal in order to better survive the given crisis. I think the most important thing is to find the right attitude.

9. Do you think it would be helpful if there were certain rules for communication and behaviour in the company between manager and employee during a crisis and what do you think should be the most important rule?

Certainly not different. Not really and should not be different from the actual. I say processes, when it comes to organising procedures, that is, the principle of eye level. The principle of also having accountability, which you have to give. So, also in the sense of listening to the fact that employees finally also have a say in this and not simply not. In other words, not just defining and determining, but helping to shape it. The staff should be involved in shaping this. And what do you do with the results in the end? Then, of course, responsibility. The idea then is to determine the actual plan. You actually have to do that. Of course.

10. What do you think is the most important thing when it comes to leadership in times of crisis?

What is most important is first of all that you are in control of yourself, that you document to the outside world that you are not helplessly facing a situation and are helpless and nervous and afraid, but that you clearly and distinctly show your whole appearance. One simply has the whole. view and thus also one, as they say, in control. Yes, there is always a way, that is, always the way of the solution. There is always a solution and you have to convey that.

11. How does your leadership style affect your employees in times of crisis?

I can think of nothing better than to repeat myself. Because if the leadership does not panic, the employees will not panic either. I can't think of anything better to say right now. Maybe I'll have to get over it for a while.

12. How many employees do you have?

Five. And five employees are manageable.

13. What do you expect from your employees in times of crisis?

Yes, so first of all it's quite clear that you really think along with him and also look for ways to stabilise things and bring the necessary calm into the company or carry it along. And above all, that you are able to develop the idea on this basis. I think this is very important, at least in small companies like ours. It is more the psychological factor that needs to be assessed and placed in Berlin as an important focus. It is already to know a ready-made treatment plan ready-made treatment plan, I think like in a building not there the pronounces a fire and then there is an escape plan, which is fixed. If there's a fire now, there's always this escape plan and I don't think there can be this stable always effective crisis plan in all its details. There won't be. But there are those that behave for some reason, that you have to control. And you have to do that. First of all, you have to do it. Must be manifested in writing? And that must be known all must still be available. So. that. Have. Immediately. Actually. Then. Then. This. In this state. Being able to move yourself. And not have to waste time first. In order to then bring the. To bring the individual or the people as a whole onto this path. Crisis means time. Time is an adult factor, time is important. The sooner I am stable, the better I can face such a crisis.

14. Do you think it is easier for corporations, for example, to manage a crisis? And why?

No. I don't think it's easier.

15. Did your employees behave differently in times of crisis and how?

Thank God I have personally had to survive and organise so many crises. But also of different kinds. Once there was a real economic crisis in the company itself that had to be overcome. That was more difficult than having to stand and organise the pandemic now. But what is important, and this is actually repeated now, is that one has not given up and does not give up. But not just to support with, well, biblical words, but with clever idea. With facts. With instructions. So, with instruction in the sense of the, the, the show is there. There is actually substance itself. And on the idea one can then move on. And yes, that is, I think always everything. And then in the case of economic crises, of course, that alone is not enough. A few other factors have to play a role.

16. During the crisis, did you ever deny responsibility to your employees?

No.

17. Looking back, would you do more for your company or for your employees in times of crisis?

It is not a question of wanting or not wanting or being able or not being able. And when I say yes, then it is not a question of wanting, but of being able. And then we come back to the questions we asked at the beginning. It would be much easier if you could work with at least a master plan from the very first second.

18. In Germany, what do you think is the most used type of communication in small and medium-sized enterprises between managers and employees?

In our company, too, it is the spoken word that is still live, that is, it comes out of the mouth and goes into the ear. But in larger companies, I think it is still much more enlightened. Telephone, e-mail, any messenger forum applies whatever. So, Globus is integrated, the signal for beaconing or something. The doves of peace, I don't believe that anymore.

Appendix S: Interview P13

1. As every company has gone through the crisis in 2020, can you explain how you managed to deal with it? Before the crisis, did you have some kind of crisis plan for situations like this?

Yes, we have a pandemic crisis plan. But we made it when we realized that there was a pandemic or that it was coming. Yes, of course. But nevertheless, there is a pandemic plan from Stuttgart that has to be applied to the companies. So, we didn't create it ourselves, but we took over the existing one from Stuttgart and adapted it to our company. The adaptation was relatively quick because it was very global. But all the essential points were immediately available to us. But we didn't think about such things in advance, because we always optimistically assume that what has been can be continued in a positive way. I think that's in our nature. One then simply sounds out such negative things. So, there are sectors of the economy or pressure area 2 like the supplier industry, I'll say for food and pharmaceuticals. For them it is an Audi component of the customer. The pandemic plan to run an existing pandemic plan. That's more like submitting the future and handling the supply chains. That's a fact, of course. Important. If I have to secure the production of medicines and so on with my company, for example, I also have to secure the production in the event of a crisis in the war or else what. That's why I had to do it, because I used to work in the pharmaceutical industry before. But we went in quite mentally unprepared. Who could have been mentally prepared for this?

2. In your opinion, was your company successful in dealing with the crisis?

I think that we are dealing with the crisis very successful.

3. Do you regret not having a crisis plan prepared in advance? Do you think it would have been helpful?

Well, we had one right after the crisis started. But you could only drive on sight. There, the best plans are of no use now. So, right now, we have to always react according to the current situation. What would have happened if, for example, we had significantly fewer orders? After all, if we had only been able to get orders through traditional sales as before? We have also been very lucky in this. It is simply a matter of chance and luck. In addition, we as a company were not hit directly by the staff. So, in the end, almost no one was sick and it may well be from that. I had a very high level of sick leave in the company before the pandemic officially started, in January and February 2020. We were really affected ourselves. We had many cases where we didn't know why, and the doctor actually just said flu. Flu-like symptoms. What this now has to do with the other and with Covid 19 is relatively unclear. Maybe it is the reason why we here in the region of Sachsen Anhalt are so little affected by it – because we had it before?

4. Do you think your company would have been more successful in crisis management if there had been a crisis plan?

I guess so, on the one hand, and on the other hand, in retrospect, nothing major would have changed if the situations had remained the same. Everything else will be conjecture and I assume that through a high degree of improvisation skills the company will be able to master the situation even without a pandemic plan. But that is individual. You need flexible minds, lateral thinking, minds that can master this through improvisation and control, that can take action depending on the situation.

5. As a manager, how did you communicate with your staff during the crisis?

Open and holistic. All the necessary information was directly forwarded to the staff via notices and without hesitation. The acceptance of the measures and crisis by the people was very, very controversial. There was a wide range, from panic to intelligent ignorance. It has been observed. That was something new for many people. A very interesting one in the sense of "Oh, we're going to get some extra free time now”. The same thing. All this short-time (Kurzarbeit) work at the beginning was interesting to some of the employees. I, myself, can also take part. That's about it. And then comes a point. At some point it gets on your nerves and you're glad when it's over. And that is also communication. When it comes to the home office - at first, they're all fired up, but when it gets serious or has been serious for a while, they're fed up. So, it's a new experience for many and a new experience also brings new insights. And my country appreciates what was before. It changed. So, the current pandemic, the way it's being done right now, definitely changes a whole behaviour towards each other. Also, the attitude towards work. Some of them think “I don't need all this at all”. And the willingness to work decreases for the majority of the employees. The willingness to work, which they had before, drops quite a lot with many or most of the employees. They are saying: “But I only do what is necessary, I don't know what tomorrow will bring” - and so they have completely lost their future goals. Because you can always count on it. Now I'm at home and that's not bad either, because I can't do anything. So, they can cope with the little they have and then motivate them to do more. Then they're caught in their so-called thinking loop and it's incredibly difficult to get them out again. Well, that's not only supposed to happen to the staff, but also to everyone. It is general mood, the whining. And I agree, because it's just such a depressive mood, depressive moods in society as a whole. So, I understand that you can get out. You can't. I don't know. When you live here in the countryside, it's all easier. Somehow, the people with high improvisation possibilities will get through this crisis without psychological damage.

6. Looking back, what would you change about your communication during the crisis? With your staff?

Pass on less information. Because a lot of information that is understandable for us, it is sometimes not understandable for the stuff. And they had an overview. It is ok if those do not allow themselves to be instrumentalized. But on Monday everyone was in a panic. But we are all obliged to implement the law and so you are part of the regime. But you can also see that in people and that puts it into perspective all by itself. When I think about it, in the first pandemic phase, even friends and acquaintances of ours, where I felt like I was hitting my head, they had a sign on their door. We're staying at home. They came here. Friends with whom we were in the car park. Please stay away. And they were so panicked. They sent out for food. That's terrible. Extremely.

7. What do you think is important for the resilience of the company in times of crisis?

Employee loyalty and employee identification with the company.

8. Do you think it would be helpful if there were certain rules for communication and behaviour in the company between managers and employees during a crisis?

Yes. But they should always exist, even without a crisis. Those are the flaws that we have, they must be eliminated. The crisis leads us to see that clearly, because the flaws are there, too. They are just more visible during the crisis. Because when that is going on, one always tends to let it go easily.

9. What do you think is the most important when it comes to leadership in times of crisis?
It depends on the nature of the problem. So, if I have problems with the employee, then the leadership, that is the carrot and stick, the stroking and the driving. Important when it comes to economy, it's about looking at how I can save the company, for example, or bring it through the crisis by building up capacities. If I have a financial problem, I look at how I can get support. And in all these areas, networks are always important, i.e. the contacts you have. And if you have good concepts, you can't generalize. Leadership. If the leadership is already shaky, then all change as well. It's like I am the image role model and I'm insecure of myself. Then I clearly and unambiguously transfer that to the others. We can now also see, for example, that transferring insecurities is portrayed as weakness in the general population or also in the company. And if a leadership position presents weakness to the outside world, it is no longer followed. So, people will no longer follow him, and thus the leader of an organization, people, a company, an area, never mind what, loses his credibility. As a leader, you can't sit in the corner drooling. For the sake of God's word. You must be able to do something and have ideas, to think laterally without being a lateral thinker. And that's what people feel. Whether there are people who have answers to questions and who also roll up their sleeves. I also see that as important. And taking employees seriously as people with their fears.

10. How does your leadership style affect your employees in times of crisis? Have there already been any responses?

In times of crisis, employees should have the trust in leader and “follow” him.

12. What do you expect from your employees in times of crisis?

Loyalty and integration as well as identification with the company and what they do. And trust.

13. Do you think that it is easier for corporations, for example, to cope with a crisis?

Yes, but it doesn’t certainly have to be easier. Just imagine, you are a leader of a big corporation, and you have to let off 8000 people because of a crisis. That's probably not less stressful than, for example, eight people. It is not just about the company; it is also about the people.

14. Did your employees behave differently than usual in times of crisis?

Yes. And insecurity made them lethargic, aimless...

15. Did you ever deny responsibility to your staff during the crisis?

Denied? We have no responsibility for the crisis, but a leader will never deny a responsibility for his staff. A clear no.

16. Looking back, would you do more for your company or for your employees in times of crisis?

If we had the financial possibility, financially? Yes, that is, if the company had the financial possibility to do so. Financially, humanly, psychologically and physically. Absolutely. We have done a lot for our employees by having enough work. During the crisis, that should be the most important thing. So, we have created the conditions so that everyone can continue to pay for their “bread and butter” and there are not many people on short-time work. That is good preparatory work. Don't misunderstand If you keep your work healthy. Without work, the body and the mind atrophy. I think we've done some good groundwork together in the past few years and it's paid off now in the times of crisis. It wasn't just the good Lord that sorted something out for us; we did it. But we were also lucky. You just have to be, that's part of it.

17. What do you think is the most used way of communication in small and medium-sized enterprises between manager and employee in Germany?

Personal conversation