


# BEFORE EPIPHANY: AN ASSESSMENT OF DONALD TRUMP'S CRISIS LEADERSHIP ON THE EVE OF THE COVID - 19 PANDEMIC

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## Abstract

In management discipline, the words “crisis” and “change” are usually mentioned together at many points. In the discipline of psychology, the word “epiphany” represents the positive development of individuals by virtue of sudden and drastic changes in their lives. In this context, it is possible to say that the covid-19 pandemic has been an epiphanic experience not only for underdeveloped countries but also for super-powerful countries such as the U.S. Because the U.S, which faced the covid-19 pandemic under the leadership of Donald Trump, unexpectedly failed in this struggle and experienced a deep epiphany. In this case study, the role of the leader of the U.S, Donald Trump, has been tried to analyse in terms of crisis leadership during the pandemic response phase. More specifically, a few steps have been taken back to look at what Trump possessed on the eve of the crisis and how he responded to the crisis at the onset of the pandemic outbreak. Thus, it has been tried to determine the distance (gap) between Trump's potential power and his kinetic power in the context of the crisis leadership framework. To do this, we have closely examined Trump's pandemic leadership before the first case date (21 January) and from that date to National Emergency Announcement (March 13) period through the lens of “The Framework for Assessment of Crisis Leadership” proposed by Boin et al. (2013). In the light of events and testimonies, it is possible to say that Trump's pandemic response has negatively affected both his political destiny and the destiny of the Americans.

**Keywords:** Crisis leadership, Early detection, Making critical decisions, Sensemaking, Donald Trump.



## EPIFANİDEN ÖNCE: COVID-19 PANDEMİ ARİFESİNDE DONALD TRUMP'IN KRİZ LİDERLİĞİNİN DEĞERLENDİRİLMESİ

### Özet

Yönetim disiplininde “kriz” ve “değişim” kelimeleri genellikle birçok noktada birlikte anılır. Psikoloji disiplininde “epifani” kelimesi, bireylerin yaşamlarında ani ve şiddetli değişimler nedeniyle olumlu gelişimini temsil etmektedir. Bu bağlamda covid-19 pandemisinin sadece az gelişmiş ülkeler için değil, ABD gibi süper güçlü ülkeler için de epifanik bir deneyim olduğunu söylemek mümkündür. Çünkü, Donald Trump

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liderliğinde Covid-19 salgınıyla karşı karşıya kalan ABD, beklenmedik bir şekilde bu mücadelede başarısız olmuş ve derin bir epifani yaşamıştır. Bu vaka çalışmasında, pandemi müdahale sürecinde ABD lideri Donald Trump'ın kriz liderliği açısından rolü analiz edilmeye çalışılmıştır. Daha spesifik olarak, krizin arifesinde Trump'ın neye sahip olduğuna ve pandemi salgınının başlangıcında krize nasıl tepki verdiğine bakmak için birkaç adım geri gidilmiştir. Böylece kriz liderliği çerçevesi bağlamında Trump'ın potansiyel gücü ile kinetik gücü arasındaki mesafe (boşluk) belirlenmeye çalışılmıştır. Bunu yapmak için, ilk vaka tarihinden (21 Ocak) önce ve bu tarihten Ulusal Acil Durum Duyurusu (13 Mart) dönemine kadar Trump'ın pandemi liderliğini Boin ve Vd.. (2013) önerdiği "Kriz Liderliğini Değerlendirme Çerçevesi" merceğiyle yakından inceledik. Olaylar ve tanıklıklar ışığında Trump'ın pandemi yanıtının hem kendisinin siyasi kaderini hem de Amerikalıların kaderini olumsuz etkilediğini söylemek mümkündür.

**Keywords:** Kriz liderliği, Erken teşhis, Kritik karar alma, Sezme kabiliyeti, Donald Trump.



## Introduction

The Ottoman Empire entered World War I and was planning a new attack against the Russians on the Caucasus Front under the command of Enver Pasha on December 15, 1914. Enver Pasha held a meeting with his general staff before the siege in Erzurum. Together with Enver Pasha, allied German commander Bronzard Pasha and 3rd Army Commander Hasan Izzet Pasha attended the meeting. Hasan Izzettin Pasha was the superior of Enver's from the military school. Enver Pasha pointed Sarikamish on the map and said to his comrades he wanted to attack there. While Bronzard agreed with him, Hasan Izzettin Pasha said it was not a good idea. According to Hasan Izzettin Pasha, the soldiers were not ready for a possible war in terms of supplies and weapons, and the weather was not suitable for an attack (Meydan, 2018). But Enver Pasha objected to him with anger and said that the soldiers wanted this war as well. Hasan Izzet Pasha's response to this was: "Because they are afraid of you". In the upshot, Enver Pasha did not even heed the superior's warnings and did not develop an emergency plan for cold and epidemics. His possible political and military achievements were already exciting him and therefore he could not think rationally. In this intensity of emotion, he was very confident in both himself and his soldiers. But this high self-confidence would not bring him victory. Unfortunately, the vast majority of Turkish soldiers would die (estimated death toll 40.000) on the way because of epidemics (typhus) and cold before they even entered the war. Returning home safely, the veteran soldiers would say, "Lice defeated us, not the Russians" (Balcı, 1999, p. 276).

The Sarikamish Disaster has been noted as an epiphanic case in Turkish military history and nothing has been the same after this painful memory in military management. In fact, Enver Pasha was considered a well-trained and highly experienced officer. He graduated from the Military Academy with honours and actively participated as an officer in Tripoli, the Balkans, and World War I. However, Enver Pasha had never commanded a large army like the 3rd Army before. As a matter of fact, the wrong decisions he made on the table before the siege caused the loss of many people and the end of his career after the siege. Although Enver Pasha later applied censorship for seven years in order not to publicize this drama, his identity as an adventurous and irresponsible commander that history has attributed to him still remains.

106 years after this disaster, the whole world, like Turkiye, was in a different time and different war. This time all humanity had an invisible common enemy. Instead of the microbes that saved us from the Martians during the "War of the Worlds" (H. G Wells' Novel), this time a much smaller and hostile coronavirus was the protagonist. It was not fiction like in the novel, it was real and dodgy. The virus that appeared in China on the eve of 2020, suddenly began to threaten the lives of all people in the world. The first case of Covid-19, subsequently named Sars-Cov-2, was first announced by officials in Wuhan City on 31 December 2019. At first, Chinese officials reported to the WHO (World Health Organization) that there were deaths due to pneumonia for an unknown reason. This obscurity ended on January 20, China, and the WHO announced that the virus was transmitted from person to person. This was a kind of global call to get ready for all countries of the world. After that day, the whole world began to follow what happened in China as if watching a disaster movie. With one difference, the probability of being the protagonist of the movie we watched seemed quite high this time. Because the virus was easily transmitted from person to person during close contact. Moreover, it has been reported that the virus sometimes continues to live and infect without symptoms (asymptotically) in patients. That is why it quickly spread around the world through social contact and air traveling in a short time. Finally, the fire that sparked in Wuhan surrounded almost seven continents within thirty days.

Unfortunately, each country was left alone against the pandemic and adopted a strategy within its own terms instead of a global approach. There were no common medication and treatment processes at that time. Although it was a transboundary crisis, there was also no solidarity or coordination at the international level. Finally, albeit a little late on March 11, the virus had come to Turkiye. Then, as the number of cases increased gradually, we started to hear the number of deaths. Finally, the first death occurred on March 15. Now every evening, we were waiting for the authorities to explain how many of us were infected and died because of covid-19. So to say, we were trapped by an insatiable curiosity. We were always looking for answers to the questions that puzzled us about the virus. Meanwhile, on each TV channel, a doctor or politician had started talking about covid-19 and their explanations almost created a cacophony in the community. We were also expecting good news from scientists both in our country and abroad, especially from the most developed countries in terms of the scientific index. The strongest candidate among them seemed to be the U.S. Because in 2003 Bush administration against AIDS and the Obama administration against the EBOLA virus in 2014 took a global leadership initiative successfully. But contrary to expectations, the U.S was not doing well this time. While some countries reduced the damages of the virus with strict measures to respond to the pandemic (such as China, South Korea, New Zealand, and Thailand), countries such as the U.S, England, Spain, Italy, and France were not giving a good test in terms of public health. After seeing the images in Italy after China, we started to worry and fear more. In other words, these images made controversial Albert Camus' words, "*One way to know a country is to know how people die there*". Not only Camus, but Mark Twain was wrong too, because this time the truth was moving faster than the lie (*A lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is putting on its shoes*). There was a big problem and who would solve this problem on behalf of humanity? While the US may seem like a superpower in many ways and have the capacity to solve the problem, unfortunately, the recent coronavirus pandemic would have shown this country's Achilles tendon. Frankly, the U.S was handling the pandemic poorly in terms of the number of cases and deaths.

According to the news, especially in the U.S, there was a completely chaotic situation. As spectators, we could not decide whether this was a healthcare system or a leadership issue. Or was it something else?

To tell the truth, we never expected the US to fail during the pandemic. It is not difficult to guess that US citizens and experts did not expect this either. That is why some researchers have called this situation a “black swan” issue (Mirvis, 2020, p. 285). One of those who could not predict this failure was Pulitzer Prize-winning Researcher, Laurie Garrett and she described the fiasco in America's struggle against the pandemic with the words “*The paragon of sloppiness and sluggishness*” in her interview (Brinu, 2020). Although Garrett insulted Trump with the words “*the most incompetent, foolhardy buffoon imaginable*”, she also stated that the problem is bigger and deeper than Trump. Then, was the problem Trump, or was it even deeper? According to political scientist Ian Bremmer, “*Trump isn't the cause, he is a symptom*” of the system (Bremmer, 2019). At this point, we wanted to leave the answers to such questions to the sociologists and policy experts, and concentrate on Trump's crisis leadership, especially before the pandemic and during the pandemic response. There are two reasons for us to do this. First, we want to reduce the number of unknowns and focus on the usual suspect, Donald Trump. Second, there was some evidence that the characteristics of the country leaders (Donald Trump, Boris Johnson, Jair Bolsonaro) who failed to combat the pandemic got together at one point: That was to downplay the pandemic and act late against it. This made us focus on leaders rather than the system and think about the gap between leaders' potential power and kinetic power. In this respect, President Donald Trump appeared to be the most appropriate subject for our research.

When Donald Trump was elected president of America in 2016, he was 70 years old. Trump, who graduated from one of the country's prestigious universities, also had experience managing a large-capital conglomerate. Moreover, he conveyed these experiences to young businessmen in a series called “Apprentice” on the NBC television channel in 2004. The popularity of Trump that formed in these years increased even more, especially among the Republican voters after he was elected president in 2016. As a matter of fact, the Trump administration was doing well in terms of economic and political factors. Besides, he had not encountered a serious problem that would test his leadership until the pandemic. But what turned the wind upside down would be Covid 19 pandemic, which begins with the new year, 2020. At the end of August, under Trump's leadership, the number of cases would reach at least 6 million, and 183,000 people would die on American soil. The pandemic would adversely affect not only the health system but also the political, social, and economic structure of the country. All these negative developments would cause Trump to lose the election in 2021. Today some policy analysts (Bryant, 2020) (Bennett and Berenson, 2020) have cited Trump's loss in the last election as the fiasco in his fight against the pandemic.

The purpose of this research is to investigate the early detection, sensemaking, meaning-making, making critical decisions, and communication executive tasks adopted by Donald Trump on the eve of the Covid-19 pandemic. In this paper, we step back to consider the position of the U.S before and during the first crash of the pandemic. Rather than a broad framework assessment, we deliberately focus on five managerial roles that we consider prioritized in responding to the pandemic. It should not be forgotten that these executive tasks are crucial in understanding and coping with the crisis. It is also crucial that

using a crisis assessment framework will help us see the leader's role in the crisis and identify problems arising from the leader. To do this, first, like a Hollywood documentary screenwriter, it was imagined that the president was meeting with his staff at the White House before the pandemic and discussing the reports presented by the experts sitting at that table.

In this study, we applied the documents related to Trump's Covid-19 response to understand and explain the factors based on five executive tasks of effective crisis management during the early phase of the crisis. Our primary focus is to examine the position and decisions made by Trump at the onset of the pandemic. By doing so, it has been tried to shed light on what Trump did on the eve and at the onset of the pandemic in terms of crisis leadership. To speak metaphorically, it was desired to see how Trump was positioned in the trench before and during the first crash of the pandemic war. More specifically, the following research questions were posed.

RQ (1): What did Trump possess before the pandemic, and did he use it to prevent the pandemic? (Early detection)

RQ (2): Did Trump create a credible picture that makes everyone understand the potential dangers of the Covid-19 pandemic? (Sensemaking)

RQ (3): Did Trump offer a clear interpretation of the Covid-19 response and persuasive narrative about returning to normal life? (Meaning making)

RQ (4): Did Trump make critical decisions during the responding coronavirus phase? (Making critical decisions)

RQ (5): Did Trump implement effective communication during the responding coronavirus phase? (Communication)

This case study offers two main contributions to the field of crisis leadership. First, with this research, readers will see how dire the consequences can be for a country leader (Donald Trump) with sophisticated technology and extraordinary scientists to ignore the crisis and not take action seriously. Second, this study reveals that the fate of a crisis has a meaningful relationship with the mind level (awareness, sensemaking, meaning-making, responsiveness, interaction sense) of the leader who manages it. The spark point of this paper is not the fact that the U.S suffered a great number of deaths and cases during the fight against covid-19. In addition, it is not desired to defame Trump for his leadership through an ad hominem perspective. The main motivation for this paper is to answer leadership questions about why a superpower country like the U.S has been ineffective in responding to the crisis. To do this, the paper is organized as follows. We first review the theoretical basis of crisis leadership and the five executive tasks of a crisis leader. Then we wanted to see more clearly the gap between Trump's potential and kinetic power in terms of crisis leadership. In the final section, we discuss the findings in terms of crisis leadership theory and draw some conclusions.

## A. THEORETICAL BASIS

### 1. Crisis Leadership

Especially in mega crises, effective crisis leadership helps to look at the incidents systematically and to solve the problems before they become chronic. In crises that become chronic or cause great destruction, the leadership factor is often shown as the address of failure or scapegoat. In other words, leaders are usually saluted as heroes (true leaders) when they succeed and as scapegoats when they fail (Boin and Hart, 2003). For this reason, crises are considered both a threat and an opportunity for leaders. Rosenthal et al., (1989) describe a crisis based on four basic pillars (threat, time, uncertainty, and making critical decisions) as follows. A crisis is “a serious threat to the basic structures or the fundamental values and norms of a system, which under time pressure and highly uncertain circumstances necessitates making critical decisions” (p. 10). Coombs (2007) also defines a crisis as a “*significant threat to operations that can have negative consequences if not handled properly*” (p.3).

Covid-19 demonstrated that some leaders had begun to rely on effective crisis leadership and act based on public health. But it also showed that some leaders were driven by political and economic motives rather than public health. Therefore, in a chaotic and foggy situation created by the pandemic, it is necessary to distinguish between good and bad leaders by looking at their crisis actions. Fortunately, Boin et al., (2013) proposed to make this assessment through a scientific guide. The researchers determined the executive tasks that political and public leaders should do to overcome the crisis and gave us an objective guide to the extent which they fulfil these tasks. Effective crisis management depends on the effective combination of these executive tasks.

### 2. Being a Bridge Between Past and Future (Early Detection)

Boin et al., (2020) accepted the covid-19 pandemic as a transboundary mega-crisis as it spread all over the world. Although the emergence of a transboundary crisis such as Covid -19 is perceived as an unexpected phenomenon for citizens, it is an expected situation for proactive public authorities. It is obvious that transboundary crises often occur when stress builds up in a particular area just like earthquakes or financial crises.

In mega or transboundary crises, proactive public leaders read early warning signals with a proactive management approach and respond appropriately to the crisis. In other words, proactive leadership envisages taking measures without crises and taking action before crises occur. To do this, leaders benefit from many instruments such as training, simulations, cultural change, monitoring, potential knowledge, and past experiences (Boin, 2009) (Boin et al., 2018). Gaining a perspective on the future based on current accumulation and past experiences can only be achieved in this way.

### 3. Creating a Collective Understanding (Sensemaking)

When a crisis breaks out, public leaders first need to perceive the origin, nature, and consequences of the crisis to make authoritative interpretations of the crisis (Ansell et al., 2014). But making sense becomes much more difficult for leaders in unpredictable and evolving situations or situations of high stress and deep uncertainty. In such conditions, public leaders are initially bombarded with very different information and solution alternatives. To create a collective understanding or make a correct inference (sensemaking), public leaders first need to analyse the situation in depth with confirmed

information and then share an operational plan (vision) with the community (Mirvis,2020) (Crayne and Medeiros,2020; Boin et al.,2018). Action must take place after the process of sensemaking because action without a collective understanding can deepen the crisis or create new crises.

Weick et al., (2005) define sensemaking as “*sensemaking involves turning circumstances into a situation that is comprehended explicitly in words and that serves as a springboard into action*” (p.409). In this context, it is possible to say that in an effective sensemaking process, leaders must first collect, analyse and comprehend the necessary information, and then give an appropriate response. Although the leaders are naturally the final decision-makers and guiding role in a crisis, it is very difficult to think of them as a one-man profile away from team play, especially in the sensemaking process of mega-crises. In other words, leaders should not act lonely and make critical decisions in the formation of collective understanding. When unforeseen crises emerge or crises involve deep uncertainty, leaders are forced to collaborate with experts and need to involve experts in the decision-making process.

Effective sensemaking depends on the leader giving satisfactory answers to the questions (e.g., what the hell is going on? How threatening the situation is? Who am I in this crisis? What am I supposed to do?) of the people who are confused by the crisis. The rational responses of the crisis leader to these questions will inherently make collective sensemaking more understandable and persuasive. In this regard, sensemaking is accepted as a cognitive process formed in the brains of leaders or individuals. On the other hand, sensemaking also has a social dimension that includes beliefs, norms, and expectations that represent the community. By talking among themselves and sharing information, the public creates a consensus (collective sensemaking) about what they see and live (Boin et al., 2021).

Finally, crisis leaders need to make a clear statement to the public in the light of verified information and present a credible picture for everyone to comprehend the potential dangers of the crisis (shared awareness). That's why sensemaking is accepted as an ongoing process. With new information, leaders create new sensemaking based on their past experiences and individual interpretation (Weick et al., 2005). With the new sensemaking process, new roles and actions are also be determined. Kalkman (2019) argued that crisis responders become aware of their own roles and actions through shared awareness. For this reason, first, the leaders and then the citizens need to understand and comprehend the dimensions of the crisis correctly.

#### **4. Being a Credible Narrator (Meaning- Making)**

In a major crisis, when the anxiety and fears of the individuals exposed to the crisis are very intense, they naturally need horizontal and vertical communication. Effective vertical communication, especially between leaders and citizens, is pivotal to deal with the crisis. Because one of the most effective ways to relieve citizens' worries is to create a credible narrative that is adopted by the citizens through effective vertical communication of leaders. But this is not as easy as it seems. The creation of this shared awareness narrative in a community largely depends on the leader's clear interpretation of the situation in terms of social values and his persuasive narrative about returning to normal life (Meaning- Making). The most important benefit of this is that citizens' perceptions and behaviours can be changed in line with the government's strategies through a persuasive narrative. In other words, leaders need to attribute meaning to the ongoing crisis to justify their actions and plans. Through a persuasive narrative, leaders can answer not only the question of what is going on but also what/how should be done to cope with the crisis (Ansell et al., 2014). The key concept here is to create meaning in the narrative because it is only

with this meaning that radical changes in both official institutions and the daily life of citizens can be achieved (Boin et al., 2018; Boin et al., 2013). Only persuasive narrative leaders can achieve this.

### **5. Get Things Done (Making Critical Decisions)**

The fate of people living on a knife-edge during mega-crises often depends on leaders and their ability to make critical decisions. In those times, leaders must make critical decisions rapidly and accurately. Recent evidence shows that responding to the covid-19 pandemic threat depends on the making critical decision ability of leaders and requires swift and effective decisions. However, it is possible to say that some factors hinder leaders to create sense-making and making critical decisions in the covid-19 pandemic crisis. For instance, initially little was known about the virus, and this uncertainty left leaders in a difficult position in the decision-making process. Similarly, WHO stated in its quick guide that SARS-CoV-2 has never been seen before and its features were not fully known. That is why this virus was labelled as a “novel coronavirus”. It is possible to say that this feature negatively affected the decision-making process for both leaders and healthcare teams of nations.

In fact, the process of making critical decisions of proactive public leaders begins much earlier. Because leaders with great responsibility and authority are naturally expected to prepare their countries for mega crises. A proactive pre-crisis process has three sub-stages: early detection, prevention, and preparation (Coombs, 2007). As mentioned before, in phase early detection, crisis leaders try to detect early warning signals of crisis to make decisions. They need to take into consideration early warning signals to prepare and then spring into action to prevent crisis (making critical decisions) (Boin et al., 2018). The early detection task gives leaders the most important clues in responding to the crisis. Thus, crisis leaders need to analyse and develop strategies based on early warnings.

In times of crisis, leaders sometimes have too many options in responding to crises, and sometimes, on the contrary, the number of options is too few. This lack of choice puts pressure on leaders and can prevent them from taking action rapidly. In uncertain situations, especially due to a lack of knowledge, leaders may lose their decision-making ability and action function. Effective crisis leadership is therefore considered to be the cornerstone of an adaptation process (Boin et al., 2013). Especially in response moments, effective crisis leaders put an effective choice into practice and make critical decisions swiftly to achieve results. But making critical decisions in mega or transboundary crises should not be only an individual initiative of leaders. Critical decisions should be made by filtering different decision-making and coordination forums.

### **6. Being at the Stage as a Conductor (Communication)**

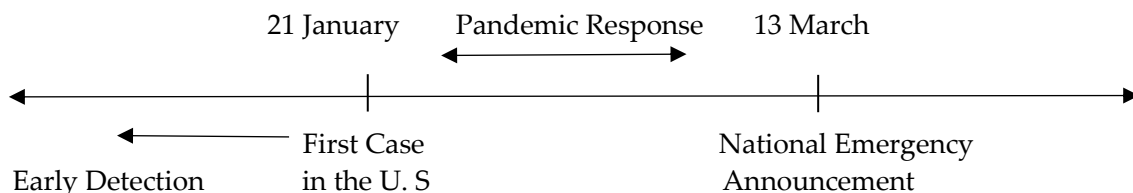
Crisis leaders are authoritarians who need to persuade citizens to implement strategies to deal with the crisis. If citizens are not persuaded, it will most probably be difficult to achieve success in practice (Ansell et al., 2010). That is why communication between leaders and followers is pivotal, especially during sudden mega or transboundary crises. In such situations, citizens naturally want to trust their leader and to be assured that they will be protected from the dangers of crisis. Building such firm trust between citizens and leaders can only be achieved through effective communication. Leaders' being open and honest, speaking with deep empathy, being the first source of information, showing competence, being in control of the situation, and showing dedication will be effective in building such a firm trust between leaders and followers (CDC, 2021).



Coombs (2012) defined crisis communication as the collection, processing, and dissemination of information necessary to control the crisis. Communication is an ongoing process and requires great care. Communication that is broken or damaged during the crisis can undermine trust, which can lead to chaos. Therefore, in an effective language of communication, leaders need to explain clearly to the public how things are to be done and by whom. It is obvious that timely and accurate public statements by leaders will both save them time and prevent a crisis from getting worse. In addition, leaders must fulfil their pro-social role through communication (e.g., stay home, wash hands), especially in pandemic crises such as covid-19. For this, it is crucial not only to use classical communication methods (press conferences, public speeches, tv interviews, etc.) but also to use social media platforms, which is the most effective communication network of our time.

## B. METHOD

This study is an example of qualitative research. *“Qualitative research is a process of naturalistic inquiry that seeks an in-depth understanding of social phenomena within their natural setting or context”* (Klenke, 2015, p. 6). By using the methodological approach, Trump's crisis leadership was examined in detail in terms of five executive tasks on the eve of the pandemic and in the response stage, and in the final analysis, the effectiveness of crisis leadership was tried to be questioned with inductive logic (post-positivism) in the study. The case study method has been adopted and identified a theory that will shed light on us throughout the study. (Berg and Lune, 2019). In such studies, there is an *“in-depth description and examination of a limited system”* (Merriam, 2018, p. 40). To do this, we tried to reach the documents (news, speeches, tweets, interviews, articles, books, reports, news bulletins) related to the subject. The early detection time frame of our study was determined before the first corona case in the U.S. The response time frame of our study covers the period between the first case date (21 January) and the date of Trump's National Emergency Announcement (13 March) (**Figure 1**). To make the paper more systematic we applied *“The Framework for Assessment of Crisis Leadership”* by proposed Boin et al. (2013).



**Figure 1.** Time Frame

## C. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

### 1. What Did Trump Possess Before the Pandemic, and Did He Use It to Prevent the Pandemic? (Early Detection)

Today, the management discipline is highly experienced in crises and crisis management. In theory, there is little uncertainty and a wealth of knowledge about how governments will effectively deal with crises. In other words, strategic plans for what precautions to be taken not only in earthquakes or

financial crises but also in pandemics have been scientifically put forward before. From this perspective, The Trump administration has a significant advantage over other countries in terms of science, personnel, economy, and equipment. In addition, considering the September 11 Terrorist Attacks, Hurricanes, and the Iraq War, it is possible to say that the White House's institutional memory for crises is both fresh and rich. Despite all these gains, the data shows that Trump persistently ignored the warnings on the eve of the pandemic and failed in terms of early detection task.

In the early detection phase, first of all, Trump should have formed an effective frontline against the virus based on current knowledge and past experiences. In other words, Trump should have built a strong bridge between the past and the future. For instance, countries such as South Korea, Vietnam, and New Zealand were able to achieve this by taking early and drastic measures during this period. On the other hand, the U.S had a nightmare as a nation by taking surprisingly slow and ineffective measures.

We think that the reason for this nightmare stems from the Trump administration's handling of the event politically and economically. Because, despite a theoretical early detection task from the perspective of "*professional craft*" (Boin et al., 2021, p. 5) was carried out much earlier, such as simulation, contingency planning, controlling response capacity, coordination, required critical decisions about the pandemic, these potential gains somehow did not turn into practice by the Trump administration during the early detection phase. In fact, the covid-19 response data of the U. S shows that these gains were ignored by the perspective of "*political craft*" (p.5). According to the political craft perspective, leaders prefer to exploit the crisis as an opportunity, distort perceptions with conspiracy theories, find scapegoats, and pursue political goals, rather than public health. Acting in this direction, Trump did not tell the public about the true extent of the crisis during this phase. What is worse, he accused truth-tellers of scaring society and the stock market. However, it should not be forgotten that, under the pandemic conditions, Trump's sharing the extent of the crisis with the public at an early stage with all clarity could have helped the public to face the facts and take action as soon as possible.

In fact, Trump's failure to fulfil his early detection task would cause America to lose time and thousands of people in the near future. The U.S had already reached the number of 1666 cases and 41 deaths, when the National Emergency was declared on March 13. Based on these figures Pilkington and McCarthy (2020) considered the elapsed time between February 1 and March 16 as "*the missing six weeks*" (p.1). Mirvis (2020), also, described this period as "*denial*" and stated that the government "*misread the virus threat and discounted the early warning signals*" (p.283) during the denial period. According to the scholar, many lives could have been saved if the U.S had responded effectively to the virus-like Thailand or New Zealand in this period. In a similar vein, Yamey (2020) stated that Trump denied the virus in the period from January to mid-March, also that it would be possible to make preparations such as rapid mass covid-19 testing, monitoring and isolation policy, healthy equipment production, and increasing hospital capacities in this period.

But instead of taking aggressive measures, Trump drew attention with his words and behaviours. First of all, Trump preferred to downplay the virus outbreak and make sensational rhetoric in the early days. But the rhetoric could not prevent the increase in cases and deaths. Despite the rapidly increasing number of cases and deaths, Trump made sensational remarks at the press conference he held on March 13. He stated that he was not responsible (*I don't take responsibility at all*) for the PCR testing capacity, which was very slow throughout the country. More ironically there was a leader on the stage who was proud of his irresponsibility. Ladkin (2020) attributed the reason for this early irresponsibility of Trump

to the increase in the Republican votes (Bump Effect). But how? According to the scholar, to understand this, first of all, it is necessary to accept that there is an irrational relationship between Trump and his voters. In the Bump Effect Policy, the voters expect their leaders to reassure them that all is well in times of crisis. From a political perspective, it is possible to say that Trump, who foresaw this, also avoided responsibility by downplaying the outbreak. Because, instead of taking responsibility, he blamed previous eras, especially Obama's, as scapegoats. So, was there any truth in this blaming?

Just like Trump, Osterholm and Olshaker (2020) argued that American hospitals had less capacity and were previously unprepared in terms of medical supplies for the density of patients in emergencies. The scholars claimed that the National Pharmaceutical Stockpile, which was formed in 2003, never had the capacity to meet the needs in times of crisis, and therefore, the pre-Trump administrations were also flawed. According to them, American health workers resemble "soldiers" sent "into battle without enough helmets and rifles" (p.4) in terms of this aspect. Carter and May (2020) attributed this omission to the hollowing out of some healthcare institutions. In particular, disbanding the Global Health Security and Biodefense Unit in 2018, which is responsible for pandemic preparation, has put America in a technically difficult situation in responding to the virus. Similarly, Rutledge (2020) argued that the disbanding of the Responding Team left the Trump administration unprepared for the pandemic and lacked human capital.

In the first days of March, President Trump ignored the institutional health memory of the country by describing the crisis as "an unforeseen problem" and a "nobody expected" problem (Dale, 2020). But experts disagreed with him. For instance, Altheide (2020) stated that Trump did not take emergency measures despite the footprints of the pandemic. In addition, according to the press (Zenko, 2020; Harris et. al, 2020) Trump ignored warnings about coronavirus presented in the CIA report. The press noted that Trump downplayed the dangers of the pandemic and was slow to take action.

Luecke (2008) explained that the reasons why leaders ignore warning signs in organizational crisis management are arrogance, downplaying the problems and, not being able to connect the dots. In fact, arrogance and downplaying problems are very similar concepts. The leader of a country like America that is leading economic and technological development may naturally downplay the virus or act arrogantly by being proud of national achievements. Trump, for instance, tweeted on January 29, emphasizing his country's organizations as "Great agencies" and its experts as "best experts anywhere in the world". But being able to connect the dots is all a matter of mind level and vision. As Steve Jobs (2005) said in his Sandford Speech, "You cannot connect the dots looking forward; you can only connect them when you look back." In other words, the dots are connected by looking at historical experience and scientific heritage. In this regard, it will also be difficult to predict a possible crisis when the leader cannot connect the dots backward.

## **2. Did Trump Create a Credible Picture That Makes Everyone Understand the Potential Dangers of the Covid-19 Pandemic? (Sensemaking)**

During the early days of the pandemic, while Trump downplayed the virus, American official experts preferred to take cautious rhetoric. The rifts between the two sides began to emerge as of February. The main reason for the rift was the perception of the measures as a threat to the economy. On the other hand, it is possible to say that the low number of cases and deaths in the first days prevented everyone from perceiving the true extent of the threat. Both Trump and his official experts, for instance,

considered the virus that broke out in Wuhan to have a low probability of causing a pandemic on American soil. This fallacy can only be explained by the failure of sensemaking.

In fact, there were many question marks among citizens rather than U.S authorities in the early days of the pandemic. The situation was less uncertain and ambiguous for government officials and institutions, who undoubtedly had more knowledge than citizens. However, it should be noted that the Trump Administration did not have enough data to form a collective understanding of the nature and origin of the virus in the early days. Because the source of the virus that caused the crisis was on another country's soil.

Because the source of the virus that caused the crisis was on another country's soil, that country, China, initially shared little information about the virus. Therefore, there were heavy fogs about how and why the virus emerged and how its course would develop. As time passed, fortunately, the number of unknowns decreased with the information coming from both WHO, China, and other countries, so the virus became more recognized over time. However, governmental myopia continued on a national basis in the U.S. Because the U. S did not have enough tests and tracing capacity to see the effects of the pandemic in the country. This inability inherently made diagnosis and treatment impossible. On the other hand, the geographical size of the country and cultural differences made it difficult to collect sufficient data from the field. In a nutshell, these mentioned factors made it difficult to make sensemaking at the cognitive level for both the leader and the citizens of the U.S. While over time it became easier for Trump to sensemaking this on a cognitive level, there was still a huge gap of sensemaking in the social realm. Only strong leaders could complete this gap. Trump, who had enough knowledge, unfortunately, was not able to take action collectively and fill this gap. In addition, he failed to make the correct inferences about what the accumulated knowledge means and how to use it.

Sensemaking is a concept shaped by the perspective of the crisis leader and crew. For instance, although the first case within the borders appeared on the same day in the U.S and South Korea, the two leaders (Trump and Moon Jae-in) did not respond to the virus in the same manner and actions. While the South Korean Leader took strict measures against the virus, Trump did not approach the incident with the same seriousness. As a matter of fact, it was the SARS experience that brought South Korea and its leader to the fore, and this experience made it easier to respond to the covid-19 crisis. In the early days of the crisis, South Korea adopted large-scale rapid testing and patient quarantine in line with the plan. They had sufficient stocks of medical supplies as well. But in the U.S, everything was different. He believed that the virus would disappear with the warmer weather. He even tweeted (9 march) that it was a simple flu, so it was unnecessary to contain the virus and take extraordinary measures. The difference can only be explained by the sensemaking of the crisis.

In fact, Trump didn't understand truly the gravity of the situation until mid-March. But before the epiphany, just like Trump, some official experts noticed the virus late and did not show the determination of strong sensemaking. For instance, there is some evidence that Doctor Fauci did not adequately grasp the severity of the pandemic in the early stages of the crisis. Therefore, as a scientist, he could not give clear messages to the citizens. On February 29, after saying "*there is no need to change anything that you are doing*", he added, "*the risk is still low, but this could change*" (Today.com, 2020). Finally, on March 8, he caused people to have a dilemma about wearing masks with the following words: "*There is no reason to be walking around with a mask*" (Farmer, 2020). What is worse, about wearing a mask, both the WHO and

some important U.S public authorities such as Antony Fauci and Jerome Adams initially stated that the mask was not effective in preventing the virus (Sauer et al.,2021).

The discourses of both Trump and official experts prevented the creation of rational collective sensemaking among citizens. But as expected, it seems that the main reason for the poor sensemaking in the US social realm is President Trump. In other words, to some extent, his personality and being a phenomenon in social media prevented the formation of collective sensemaking in the community. According to Maak et al., (2020), Trump's narcissistic personality played a role as a "fire accelerant"(p.8) in the response to the virus. In addition, the scholars argued that his ideological rigidity perspective pushed science, which is the most important factor to combat the virus, into the background. What's worse, making ideological discourses instead of informing the public has led to polarization in the community. Especially, labelling the pandemic with the "Chinese virus" and "Democratic hoax" and accusing the media of making "fake news" paralyzed the rational sensemaking of his partisan supporters.

Another factor paralyzing collective understanding is Trump's failure to act with an effective vision to respond to the pandemic. Similarly, Carter and May (2020) highlighted the lack of vision. They attributed the reason for Trump's inability to react to the pandemic because he did not present a clear idea (vision) of reaction to the public. Altheide (2020) stated that Trump has endangered public health by downplaying the virus in social and mass media. Instead of informing the public, he used these platforms for personal advertising and election propaganda. As a "digital meme" (p. 534) Trump's attitude towards the virus has also become the attitude of the federal government, and even worse, he convinced voters to agree. The state of the economy and the stock market, his ratings, and the approval of followers had become primary concerns for Trump on social media. All of these were acts that prevented the public from making rational sensemaking of the pandemic.

In fact, each country had a different leadership and collective sensemaking approach, and responses to the virus were shaped according to these paradigms. Some Asian countries (New Zealand, South Korea, Thailand), for instance, reacted aggressively to the virus; conversely, the U.S, Brazil, and some European (England, Sweden) countries adopted mild strategies and spread the measures over time. On the U.S front, while the figures regarding the Health Index were in favour of the country and there were so many multidimensional reports on the table, it turned out that the government could not fight the coronavirus due to its indecision and making wrong decisions. What is worse, the government initially seemed unable to grasp dodging the pandemic and the logic of taking precautions, because there was a clear flaw in the Trump Administration's mission in sensemaking the pandemic. Boin et al. (2013) argued that a leader's mere reading of research reports would not be enough to prevent a possible crisis and that the leader's vision of the crisis was also vital. According to scholars, there are two factors that contribute to a leader's prediction, these are the leader's experience and organizational awareness.

### **3. Did Trump Offer a Clear Interpretation of the Covid-19 Response and Persuasive Narrative About Returning to Normal Life? (Meaning Making)**

In times of mega-crisis, citizens inherently want to see their leaders on stage. They need to hear from their leaders about what is going on and how to protect themselves. In this situation, leaders need to create strong narratives by evaluating potential information to answer such questions from citizens and address concerns. Thus, they both persuade the public and make them part of the solution to the crisis. New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, for instance, emphasized the meaning and purpose

of physical isolation at the onset of the pandemic, often using the slogan " *stay home to save lives*" in her speech on 14 March. She abandoned her ideological identity to mobilize more citizens against the virus. In fact, there were very few (6 cases) in New Zealand as of March 14 compared to other countries. However, Ardern took the situation seriously and became a genuine narrator by saying that the country should be prepared for new cases and that this preparation will be difficult. Ardern put it this way:

*"That's why we must go hard, and go early, and do everything we can to protect New Zealander's health"*

So, is it easy for a political leader to get rid of his ideological identity? When Covid-19 broke out, all world leaders faced the same dilemma. Leaders had to contend with the socio-economic challenges posed by strict measures while prioritizing public health (Boin et al., 2021). There seemed to be no other option. In this regard, considering Trump's response period, it is possible to say that he cares more about the socio-economic problems that will arise with strict measures than public health. Such a choice actually meant ignoring the impending pandemic. On the eve of a deepening crisis, Trump created a false image of control by downplaying the virus instead of speaking the truth to calm the public. With tweets and daily messages praising America, himself, and the Government, he prevented the public from perceiving the truth. What is worse, in this period, he also undermined the meaning-making process by calling the virus "*China virus*" and "*Democratic hoax*". With these words, he preferred to appeal to his followers who believe in conspiracies and love to find scapegoats in times of crisis. Therefore, his accusatory discourse negatively affected the process of creating rational meaning in the community. Finally, the false image that everything Trump has created is under control has inevitably pushed the public into a dangerous complacency. For all these reasons, he didn't become a strong narrator for individuals who take the covid-19 threat seriously and build trust in these people.

Cairney and Wellstead (2020) drew attention to the role of trust in effectively combating the pandemic, arguing that this element of trust between citizens and government in the U.S has been broken due to political polarization. However, the process of meaning-making in a crisis also depends on high mutual trust between leaders and relevant experts. But in the U.S, the trust between scientists and politics began to be damaged very early on. As of February, Trump and Fauci started to contradict each other on some issues.

#### **4. Did Trump Make Critical Decisions During Responding Coronavirus Phase? (Making Critical Decisions)**

The early days suggest that South Korea did not hesitate to make effective decisions when the covid-19 pandemic crisis broke out. Being experienced from the MERS outbreak in 2015 and being prepared for a new pandemic have provided them with significant comfort in the decision-making process. They had stockpiled test kits before the pandemic and also had allowed private companies to mass-produce test kits. This serial response enabled the country to reach 10000 tests per day and to carry out contact tracing with the same determination. As a result, symptomatic patients were early and successfully isolated, and the public was encouraged to wear masks in the first days (Chang et al., 2020). In fact, at first, not every nation was able to respond to the virus with determination like South Korea. After the outbreak of the covid-19 pandemic, each country gave a different response to it. There was no standard treatment on a global basis, both in prevention and medication. Although the uncertainty regarding Covid-19 has caused difficulties in tackling the pandemic, all developed countries, including the U.S, were considered to have sufficient experience and theory on how to respond to a pandemic.

From this point of view, the U.S seemed to be ahead of other countries at first. The critical problem here was whether Trump could put America's potential gains into practice or deeds.

In fact, in a mega-crisis like Covid-19, the making critical decision process begins at the early detection stage. The leader's first mission at this stage is to be prepared for the virus and try to eliminate or contain it where it emerges. To achieve this, leaders can take measures such as social isolation, limitation of movement, or contact tracing. If these critical decisions are not taken on time, the spread of the virus across the country will be a matter of time. In such a situation, the most important mission of a leader will be to make critical decisions in favour of "flattening the curve". Because the intensity of the increasing number of patients is very likely to cause irreparable problems both in the health system and in the economy. Therefore, leaders need to take tough decisions such as closing schools, banning crowded activities, limiting travel, or shutting down depending on the course of the pandemic.

The controversial story of the critical decision-making process began with Trump's misreading China's response decisions to the virus, the country where the virus broke out. However, the Chinese authorities, who started to shut down the Wuhan Region on January 24, immediately after the pandemic, also started the construction of two field hospitals to meet the surge. The White House was busy setting up the Coronavirus Task Force at that time. Mike Pence, a political actor, was appointed (26 February) as the head of the Task Force, which was initially formed (January 29) under the direction of Alex Azar. In fact, Pence was not a health expert, but a political actor that Trump could easily lead or mislead.

Another important decision was that the Trump administration imposed a travel ban on non-Americans from China on January 31. After 40 days, as cases rose in Europe, the U.S expanded the bans and directed passengers from China to certain airports on March 11. Meanwhile, the test kits distributed to the states by the CDC under the coordination of The Task Force were surprisingly found contaminated. Despite this negativity, in the early days, the Trump administration did not choose to make decisions to prevent the spread of the virus, such as wearing mask, social distance, and isolation. In other words, throughout January and February, the Trump administration did not take any major decisions apart from travel restrictions and forming a task force. They did not follow a federal playbook. Since there were no clear federal guidelines for responding to the virus, the states have responded to the pandemic according to their strategy and policies. In a similar vein, Adolf et.al (2020) argued that state governors' measures varied according to their political tendency. The scholars attributed America's failure to the slow action of republican governors against the virus. This was due to Trump's immense popularity among republican voters and his prioritization of economic concerns over public health.

### **5. Did Trump Implement Effective Communication During the Responding Coronavirus Phase? (Communication)**

A sudden outbreak of a new virus-like covid-19 creates intense fear and anxiety in the community. In such situations, the communication language of the leader is pivotal in order to eliminate the panic or chaos that may occur in the community. Therefore, leaders are expected to be (should) be rapid, right, and credible (Sauer et.al, 2021). When we examine the virus response process in this context, it is possible to say that President Trump made three fatal mistakes. First, the failure of Trump to recognize the problem has led both citizens and official institutions to complacency. Second, Trump deliberately misleads the public about the nature of the virus by comparing it with flu and saying, "going to disappear". Finally, using the blaming and othering communication language instead of informing has

caused the pandemic to be perceived as a political issue rather than a public health issue. In a similar vein, Mirvis (2020) stated Trump's failure against the pandemic between January and April informed the public inaccurately and incompletely. Yamey (2020) also argued that Trump delayed federal action and misled the public in this period.

However, in times of crisis, being accessible and confronting the crisis are among the primary duties of leaders (Luecke, 2008). Today, crisis leaders are more accessible than ever before, thanks to the sophisticated developments of the millennium. Besides, social media platforms play an important role in every social crisis in the millennium age. These platforms have also been the primary communication instrument of leaders in the global coronavirus pandemic crisis. Donald Trump, for instance, is one of the leaders using these platforms in the most effective way and his followers are far more than those of other world leaders. Trump has been an active member of popular platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. Since the beginning of the pandemic, the President has used Twitter very effectively, especially for egocentric purposes. As a result of the content analysis of Kertesz and Berzleja (2020) on Trump's tweets, it was revealed that the president used communication as a tool for self-flattering and political campaigning on this platform. In addition, he used a language that led to othering in the community with the discourses of "Democratic Hoax", "Fake News" and "Chinese virus". Likewise, he diverted the communication from its purpose with the discourse that the virus would disappear with the spring. Unfortunately, Trump's political language continued until mid-March. Whereas, Trump could have used the communication language for prosocial purposes during this period. The president, for instance, could have warned the public about hand hygiene, social distancing, and avoidance of crowds in his speeches or statements.

## Conclusion

Pandemics are predictable and preventable events. In other words, they are not random events. From a historical perspective, pandemics are well-known events to both scientists and public administrators. In this respect, public leaders have a great responsibility in major crises. In a possible pandemic crisis, not only public health but also social and economic life is at great risk. In such cases, the management discipline recommends effective and proactive crisis management to the leaders.

Undoubtedly, 2020 will be remembered with examples of unsuccessful crisis leadership as much as the global epidemic. In this sense, it is inevitable that Trump will be unforgettable with his personality and approach to the crisis. The Covid 19 pandemic has shown that while America has an enormous medical and scientific capacity, it has not been able to tap into this potential because of proactive leadership in the early and response phase of the pandemic. It is very difficult to be a proactive crisis leader because such a leader is like an experienced doctor who can see the big picture from a tiny symptom. Sometimes it is necessary to start treatment with a signal so that it is not too late. Then, when should a leader and his crisis management team act when faced with a pandemic threat like the coronavirus? What should be the number of cases or deaths? As in Bob Dylan's song, how many dead people make a leader accept that enough people have passed away. The competent scientist, Larry Brilliant, underlined that leaders and crisis teams should be vigilant even with one case since the first two weeks are critical during pandemic periods. He also gave A grades to Taiwan, Iceland, New Zealand, and F grades to the U. S and England in combating the covid-19 pandemic in a TED interview in 2020.



He explained the reason for giving an F grade as political inadequacy, inability to fight, and not taking the virus seriously enough.

In this context, the leaders of Thailand, South Korea, and New Zealand have adopted an active and radical prevention strategy, despite the very low number of cases. On the other hand, despite having valid suspicions and knowledge that the Chinese government was withholding information and manipulating the number of cases during the outbreak of the virus in Wuhan, Trump did not prefer to act quickly and respond effectively. What is worse, he did not listen to the intellectual and decisional forum's voices of his own country, nor did he take into account the experiences of other countries in response to the pandemic. In other words, he became a leader who tried to do everything his own way. As a result, the course of the pandemic changed according to his perspective.

This study testifies to the details of a failure in crisis leadership. It also concludes the U. S was not ready for a pandemic in practice and its response was flawed in terms of public health. As a final remark, apart from the time period, the other important constraint of our research is the fact that we, as spectators, do not know what is really going on behind the curtain while all the events are going on. Because we believe that time will reveal the truth clearer.

#### **Ethics Committee Permission**

This article is not part of a working group that requires ethical committee approval.

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The authors contributed equally to the article.

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There is no conflict of interest between the authors



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