



# LEADING A UNIVERSITY IN THE MIDST OF A PANDEMIC (A): “DIFFICULT DECISIONS”

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## Abstract

This is part of a case series. The case ‘Leading a University in the Midst of a Pandemic’ has two parts: (A) Difficult Decisions; (B) A Fruitful Dialogue. The case follows the Rector of the University of Bologna, Professor Francesco Ubertini, as he copes with the first wave of COVID-19 outbreak in Italy. In Case (A), the Rector grapples with the first terrible weeks following the arrival of COVID-19 in Northern Italy at the end of February 2020. At the same time, he needed to make several important strategic decisions in order to ensure business continuity and the safety of 87,000 students and 5,000 faculty and staff members who constituted the community of the University of Bologna, a so-called mega-university with 5 campuses across the Emilia Romagna Region that offer 220 graduate, post-graduate and PhD courses. Case (A) focuses on what are the most appropriate leadership skills that can enable the Rector to cope with this huge crisis. It also addresses some advantages that agile methodologies can provide to large bureaucratic organizations, likewise a public University.

## Target for Teaching

- People Management
- Leadership
- Organizational behavior
- Crisis Management

## Target audience and Issues

This case was developed with an MBA audience in mind, specifically for courses on People Management, Leadership and Organizational Behaviors, where it is possible to reach an advanced level of discussion built on personal experience,

on topics like the most appropriate leadership behaviors in the management of crises. More specifically, the case can open discussion about authenticity, as well as the importance of leaders being able to vary personal styles and behaviors according to the particular stage of the crisis. Moreover, students may erroneously believe that human beings can control the external environment according to their own plans and preferences; thus, the case can illuminate that the ability to cope with uncertainty is pivotal for being successful in today's world.

Executives and practitioners may also find this case valuable for discussing how an organization should be prepared to face uncertainty and possible crises, which includes identifying and mobilizing resources as needed. The case covers agile methods that organizations can strategically adopt in order to respond more rapidly to crises.

The case could also be used in an undergraduate course on Organizational Behaviors and Crisis Management.

### **Teaching objectives**

The four teaching and learning objectives that this case is primarily intended to serve are:

- 1.** Identifying the most appropriate skills, priorities and decisions, that a leader needs to undertake to manage an organization during a crisis.
- 2.** Understanding how a leader needs to use a variety of different styles and skills to cope with the multifaced aspects of a large crisis.
- 3.** Understanding how large bureaucratic organizations can enhance their agility.
- 4.** Identifying how the external environment can shape the functioning of an organization.