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When Super (Wo)man Fails to Appear: Beyond Idealized Prototypes in Crisis Leadership

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ABSTRACT

Crisis leadership has been a topic of interest for nearly a century. Recent works present an idealized, gendered template for such leadership by casting men as masculine protectors or superheroes and women as feminine nurturers or selfless, relational superwomen. Whereas the deductive evidence for such effects is mixed at best, our work examines if these idealized prototypes reflect the current realities of *enacting* leadership during a crisis. We studied both male and female leaders, inductively, over an 8-week period during the COVID-19 pandemic. Contrary to a majority of previous leadership studies that suggest prescriptive remedies for alleviating crises, such as charisma, inspiration, or empathy, we change the scholarly conversation in crisis leadership by rejecting *idealized leadership* templates, which implicitly or explicitly assume leaders have agency. Instead, we found gender similarities in how both women and men enacted leadership in their roles by being distinctly human: replete with doubts about their agency and engaging with emotions, but moving forward nonetheless. Interestingly, gender differences emerged at a granular level in how men and women enacted leadership: men seemed to mirror the leader prototype, whereas women adapted their leadership tactics in response to contextual cues. Taken together, these findings call for redirecting the scholarly conversation in crisis leadership toward a dualism—gender similarities *and* differences can occur simultaneously in leader roles. Intriguingly, and breaking with past reviews on crisis leadership, there were no super(women) in these findings; rather they point at a complex yet parsimonious theoretical explanation for *how* crisis leadership unfolds. We discuss the implications of this theoretical exploration for future empirical work.

We have long known that the enactment and effectiveness of leadership is contingent on context (Kerr et al. 1974; Porter and McLaughlin 2006). Of particular interest in recent years are *crisis* contexts, characterized by “unexpected, highly salient, and potentially disruptive” events (Wu et al. 2021, 2), and many scholars of leadership have reaffirmed that leaders and leadership are particularly important during crises (cf. Collins et al. 2022; Wu et al. 2021). One of the more recent discussions in crisis leadership concerns the role of *idealized* gender norms

and notions (e.g., Eichenauer et al. 2022; Obenauer et al. 2024; Sergent and Stajkovic 2020)—that is, the scholarly conversation about gender and crisis leadership has progressed along largely *idealized* gender role prototypes. For example, female leaders are argued to be more effective in crises because feminine traits (e.g., empathy and a communal focus) would seem to align with the requirements of a crisis situation (Eichenauer et al. 2022; Sergent and Stajkovic 2020; Zenger and Folkman 2020). This idea is often buttressed by the notion that women have superior

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interpersonal skills, a risk-averse style, and greater empathy or compassion (Sergent and Stajkovic 2020). This narrative unintentionally imposes an *idealized feminine* template for female leaders by assigning what has been labeled a post-heroic leadership style composed of transformational leadership behaviors like consideration, care, and superior relational attributes (Fletcher 2004).

At the other end of the spectrum is the long-standing *idealized masculine* leader prototype, where leaders are cast as strong, dominant, swift, and decisive (e.g., Collins et al. 2022). This masculine prototype is well documented and can unintentionally bestow a heroic aura to leaders during crises. For example, Collins et al. (2022) categorized crisis leaders as “*shepherds* ... protecting their organizations and their followers and guiding them to safety” and as “*saints* ... acting as a beacon of empowerment and support for followers negatively affected by external crises caused intentionally by others” (pp. 6–7, emphasis added). These metaphors are problematic in that they create an unrealistic, heroic, and masculine leader prototype, framing leaders as either shepherds guiding a flock of passive followers to safety or as saints who are morally superior to others (Alvesson and Spicer 2010).

The association between crisis leadership and idealized gender norms is not entirely surprising given that many leadership frameworks and models were derived from retrospective follower accounts of predominantly male leaders and laced with the positivity of “great man” theories (Alvesson 2020; Eagly and Karau 2002; Gooty et al. 2023; Johnson and Lacerenza 2019). Indeed, the gendered nature of leadership theory at large has been well documented in previous research (e.g., Collinson 2020; Eagly and Karau 2002; Gooty et al. 2023, 2024; Petriglieri and Peshkam 2022). For example, Gooty et al. (2023, 8) wrote:

... many ideas in leadership science date back to the conclusion of the two world wars when (white) men dominated leadership positions. Although gender is extensively included as a moderator or statistical control in current leadership studies and analyses, current conceptualizations of leadership are skewed towards extraordinary power and influence. There is a growing corpus of research on women in leadership; however, our understanding of, and perhaps more importantly practical realization of, leadership and other management topics is still heavily gendered and male-dominated.

With this in mind, two themes become apparent in theories of crisis leadership. First, idealized gender norms reflecting heroic and post-heroic notions prevail, casting leaders as either masculine protectors or feminine nurturers and calling for men and women in leadership positions to conform to gender prescriptive norms and thus to “do gender” in their role (Fletcher 2004, 650). Such a gendered conceptualization paints leadership as an either/or approach, where a leader acts in ways that are predominantly and ideally feminine or masculine, and fails to consider that most people who occupy

leader roles might not have the resources nor the inclination to perform in such idealized ways. Second, because leadership theories were largely built from studies of male leaders, they tend to reflect prototypical biases associated with ideal masculine leader norms. If the methods used to build theories privilege the experiences and behaviors of one subgroup of leaders over all others, such theories cannot be assumed to extend to and represent the leadership of all who occupy leader roles. That is, these theories do not include both men and women, and thus could be disconnected from the reality of *enacting* leadership (see Gooty et al. 2023, 2024; Johnson and Lacerenza 2019). This led us to a foundational theoretical puzzle and our initial research question: how is leadership enacted during a crisis by female *and* male leaders?

Our initial interest was in understanding the enactment of leadership in times of crises for both men and women, thus seeking to build a more transferable model of crisis leadership behaviors. We wanted to capture real-time accounts from leaders as a crisis was unfolding, minimizing many of the semantic memory biases and ideal leader prototypes that creep in when we ask followers about leadership on average (e.g., Lord et al. 2020). Thus, we carried out an inductive theory-building study built on qualitative data from 58 leaders reporting 236 critical incidents across 8 weeks during the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our work contributes to the gender and crisis leadership literature by proposing a theoretical explanation for *how* female and male leaders might enact leadership during a crisis. Contrary to the majority of previous leader behavior models that provide prescriptive solutions (e.g., leaders who are more charismatic or empathetic are more effective during a crisis), we move the scholarly conversation in crisis leadership forward in a novel direction by rejecting such *idealized leadership* templates, which implicitly or explicitly assume leaders have agency. Here, we define agency as “the capacity to take action,” with a key aspect being the actor’s awareness of both their own power and that of others (Tourish 2014, 80). We find that individuals in leadership roles encounter a paradox during a crisis: their agency is limited, despite the fact that their role is presumably infused with idealized notions of agency.

As noted earlier, ideas of swift agency and power are implied in most writings on crisis leadership, as evidenced in Collins et al.’s (2022) description of “shepherds” and “saints.” However, in our work, shepherds and saints simply failed to show up. Instead, we find that the paradox of experiencing limited agency in a leader role involves processing this paradox, via cognitive and emotional elements, and then enacting leadership, which includes both prototypical and non-prototypical leadership practices. We find similarities between men and women in the overall process but differences in the elements that make up that process, with male leaders engaging in relatively more prototypical behaviors than female leaders.

1 | Crisis Contexts and Leader Behaviors: A Brief Overview

Leadership is one of the most researched and applied topics in the organizational sciences (see Avolio 2007; DeRue

et al. 2011). However, a precise definition of leadership is hard to find because it is imbued with many different meanings, some of which may not reflect the reality of leading (Alvesson and Blom 2022; Lanaj, Gabriel, and Chawla 2021). Because both “leadership” and “crisis” are contested terms (e.g., researchers do not agree on universal definitions), our understanding of crisis leadership is similarly murky, which can result in falling back on prototypical or idealized views of crisis leadership. Researchers argue, for instance, that leadership matters even more in crisis situations than in relatively stable situations (Hannah et al. 2009; Osborn, Hunt, and Jauch 2002).

Crises are often defined as events that are “unexpected, highly salient, and potentially disruptive” to organizations and their stakeholders (Bundy et al. 2017; Wu et al. 2021, 2).

Prior research has categorized crises into three distinct phases (Bundy et al. 2017; Williams et al. 2017): a pre-crisis prevention stage, an ongoing crisis response stage, and a post-crisis recovery stage. At each stage, leaders are theorized to play a large role in planning for and overcoming disruption. For instance, research on the pre-crisis stage (see Riggio and Newstead 2023, for a review) suggests that a core function of leaders is to anticipate, plan, and prepare for crises. Research on the post-crisis stage suggests that leaders drive recovery and learning through steps like after-action reviews and changing policies (Buchanan and Denyer 2013; James et al. 2011). The pre- and post-crisis stages serve as bookends for the ongoing crisis response stage, which is the focus of our work. Our review of the crisis leadership literature suggests there are two broad theoretical explanations about how leaders might act in this phase.

With some exceptions (cf. Garretsen et al. 2024), most crisis leadership research proposes that such leadership involves engaging in either heroic (e.g., swift and decisive) or post-heroic (e.g., empathetic and charismatic) behavior. James et al.’s (2011) discussion of positive behaviors exemplifies this perspective; they suggested that leaders should carefully frame crises as opportunities rather than threats and called for the study of “positive deviance” in leadership during a crisis. Wu et al. (2021) conducted a bibliometric review spanning 50 years (1970–2020) and found leader charisma to be one of the most frequently studied topics in the crisis leadership literature. Similarly, Riggio and Newstead (2023) argue for charismatic leaders’ vision, optimism, resilience, and “deliverance” of followers. Taken together, there is an implicit and explicit stance in the literature that leader behaviors like charisma, positive deviance, and transformation are both prevalent in and effective at dealing with crises. Further, as described earlier, the idealized portrait of leaders in the crisis leadership literature also includes a gendered component (e.g., Eichenauer et al. 2022; Obenauer et al. 2024; Sergent and Stajkovic 2020)—leaders are either masculine protectors (Collins et al. 2022) or feminine nurturers (Sergent and Stajkovic 2020). We argue that these theoretical foundations present three key challenges.

First, theories and empirical findings from transformational and charismatic leader behaviors, which are the most frequently

offered prescriptions to crises, are dominated by accounts and data drawn from male leaders (Eagly and Karau 2002; Hoyt and Murphy 2016; Koenig et al. 2011; Vial, Napier, and Brescoll 2016). The result is a definition of leadership based on “culturally masculine terms,” which disadvantages women (Eagly and Heilman 2016, 349; see also Ayman and Korabik 2010). Second, many of the existing leader behavior models were built by asking followers how their leaders acted on average, thus increasing the likelihood of semantic memory biases such that participants (i.e., followers) rely on their general knowledge structure about how a leader *should* act rather than on how a specific leader *did* act (Lord et al. 2020). These responses are thus more likely to be skewed toward an “ideal” or prototypical leader—one that has been cast in masculine and heroic terms (Bligh and Schyns 2007; Collins et al. 2022; Shamir 1992). Third, findings from leader behavior research may not transfer to a crisis context due to the limits a crisis can place on leader agency. In general, leadership implies agency (i.e., leadership entails having agency and control over the environment, actions, and decisions) (Tourish 2014). But what happens when a novel event occurs, like a crisis, that limits what one knows and what one can do? There is a pressing need to understand how leadership operates when agency—something we typically assume leaders have—is limited.

Our goal was to address these three limitations in the crisis leadership literature by capturing the lived experiences of both men and women serving in leader roles. Our study includes both male and female leaders; thus, we addressed the first limitation. We addressed the second limitation by asking leaders to report on their experiences each week as a crisis unfolded, thereby reducing the impact of semantic memory biases, since participants only had to recall their thoughts, feelings, and actions in the previous week rather than in general or over a long time span. We focus on leaders’ perspectives because we assume they are in the best position to report on their day-to-day work experiences (McClean et al. 2019). Finally, we addressed the third limitation by surveying leaders during a novel crisis context, thus offering a somewhat naturally occurring experimental context in which perceived agency could vary widely.

The early lockdowns and disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (April 2020–June 2020) served as the appropriate crisis context for our study for three reasons. First, this period was characterized by a high volume of ambiguous information, meaning that leaders had imperfect information to work with. Second, the crisis context was extended over time as compared to more discrete crisis events (e.g., the Bhopal gas leak and the Mann Gulch fire; Weick 1993); as such, we were able to gather ongoing, episodic information concerning participants’ leadership experiences. Third, the same crisis affected nearly all organizations, spanned industries, and caused disruptions at a scale that was unplanned, allowing us to sample leadership across time, location, and industry and build a more transferable model of crisis leadership.

2 | Methods

We integrated the day reconstruction method (DRM; Amabile et al. 2005; Gooty et al. 2014; Kahneman et al. 2004) and the

critical incident technique (Flannagan 1954; Morgeson 2005) to create a database of lived experiences of leaders during a crisis. We elicited descriptions of a critical work event (i.e., incident) as close to their natural occurrence as possible. Our weekly instructions to participants read: “Thinking about your role as a leader, recall an event from this week that stands out as particularly demanding and/or important. Describe this event in as much detail as you are able, similar to writing in a journal.” By asking participants to respond “as a leader,” we primed them to reflect on and describe events from the perspective of that role. Further, by asking participants to respond as if they were writing in a journal, we hoped to keep them grounded in reality rather than in scripts or idealized prototypes (Hansbrough et al. 2021; Sandberg and Pinnington 2009, 1151). This method offered several advantages that enabled us to minimize the idealized heroic leader prototype problem noted earlier: it allowed for an examination of leadership during a crisis as it unfolded, thus minimizing recall biases; it allowed us to sample the most demanding work events as constructed by the key actors (i.e., leaders); and it did not prime for *ideal* leadership/leader behavior prototypes.

2.1 | Procedure

We launched recruitment for our study in April 2020, when stay-at-home orders went into effect in the United States due to the global COVID-19 pandemic. We recruited participants via online platforms (e.g., LinkedIn), email lists (e.g., alumni and university listservs), and community podcasts/interviews by the lead author. These online recruitment posts were then reshared and thus were not limited to the authors' social networks. Our recruitment call asked leaders for 8 weeks of participation in exchange for a 30-min leadership training session conducted by the author team. This strategy allowed us to recruit a broad population of leaders spanning hierarchical levels and occupational settings (e.g., healthcare, education, and finance).

Participants signed up via an online link that captured their contact email (for survey distribution), demographic characteristics, work-related information, and their span of control. For inclusion, participants had to supervise a minimum of one employee, be over 18 years of age, and work full time. After signing up, participants received a brief survey every Thursday at 8:00 am EST to elicit descriptions of critical incidents that occurred during that week. The survey remained open each week until Sunday at 5:00 p.m. EST, and we sent a reminder on Friday afternoons at 3:00 p.m. EST to prompt responses. We collected data each week for a period of 8 weeks. All data collection ended in late June 2020.

Eighty-five participants who self-identified as leaders with a minimum of one direct report signed up for our initial recruitment. After eliminating participants who gave us their contact information but did not respond to a survey, our final sample consisted of 58 leaders who responded to at least one of the weekly prompts. Across 8 weeks, we gathered a total of 236 reported critical incidents (129 from female leaders; 55%). Most of our participants were between 35 and 55 years old (60%), white (80%), and at various levels of middle management, with only

TABLE 1 | Summary of critical incidents and micro practices by gender.

	Reported critical incidents	Coded critical incidents	Inductively derived micro practices
Men	102	85	113
Women	129	116	149
Did not report gender	5	5	5
Total	236	206	267

Note: $N = 58$ leaders. There were 1.28 micro practices per incident from women respondents and 1.33 micro practices per incident from men respondents.

three identifying as C-suite executives. For the purposes of our analysis, we found no meaningful differences between incidents reported by middle management and those reported by C-suite executives. Participants were approximately equally distributed by gender (53% women) (see Table 1 for a summary of critical incidents by gender). The vast majority worked in the United States (96.4%) in a variety of industries, with the most common being education (37.5%), finance and insurance (14.3%), and manufacturing (12.5%).

2.2 | Data Analysis

2.2.1 | Initial Coding

We analyzed our data using inductive qualitative techniques that focus on theory building (see Figure 1 for a visual overview of our data analysis process). The first three authors began the analysis by reading all incidents and noting their initial insights. Thirty incidents did not have enough substantial content to code and were removed from further classification and analysis. For example, the incidents “I’m not having to do any leadership tasks right now as I don’t currently have anyone reporting to me” and “Not much to report this week. Regular contact with soldiers” were removed. This resulted in a total of 206 incidents to code. As stated above, we were originally interested in leader behaviors, but our data contained many reflections that were not behavioral in nature (e.g., emotions and stressors). We coded these reflections, which ultimately led to our transition away from a narrow focus on behaviors to include leaders' feelings, thoughts, and actions.

Following this initial read, the three lead authors agreed that the first step was to understand what participants were doing and what they were reflecting on; we wanted to stay close to their language and perception in this stage of analysis (see Figure 1). Thus, we engaged in first-stage, descriptive coding using the qualitative coding software NVivo. During this stage, we asked, what is going on here from the participants' perspective (Gioia et al. 2013)? One example of a code we generated during this process was “perceiving divided loyalties,” which identified incidents where participants stated they felt they had chosen one stakeholder group over another (e.g., their managers' request over their subordinates' interests).

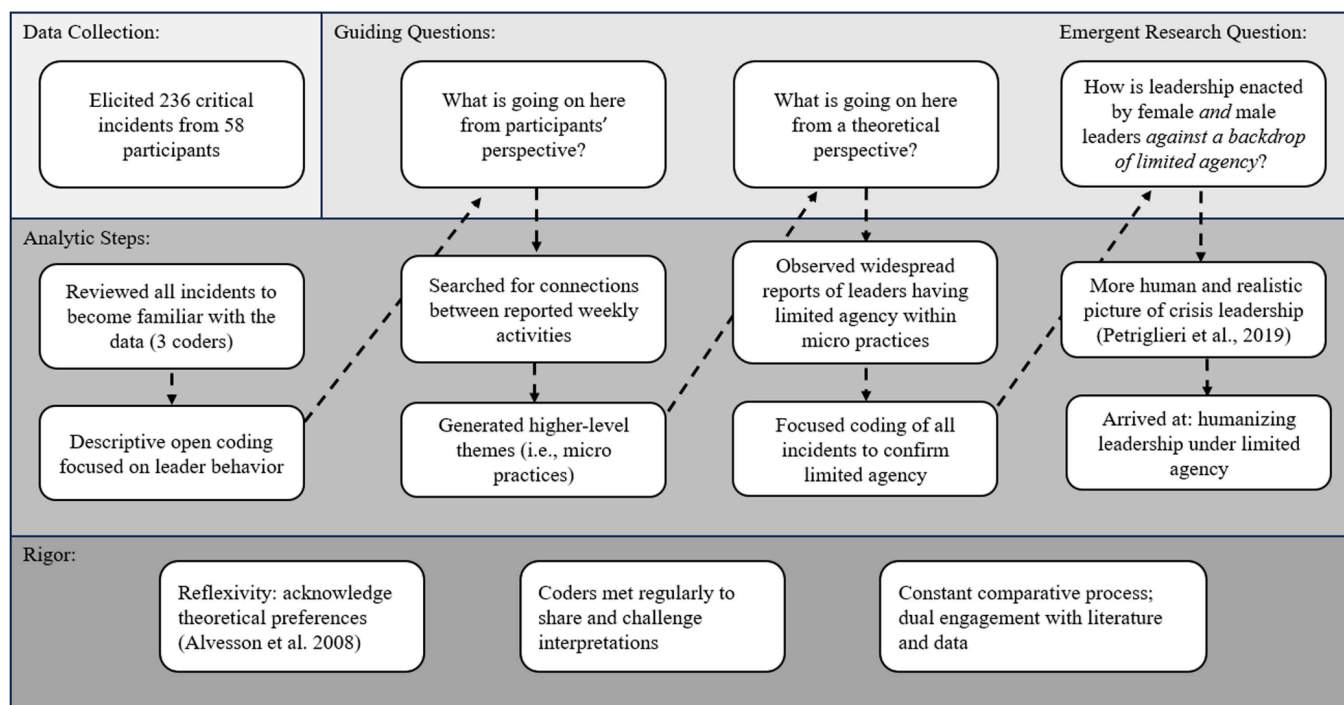


FIGURE 1 | Methodological process. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com)]

2.2.2 | Exploring Connections to the Literature

After generating initial, largely descriptive codes, we searched for connections among them with the goal of building a more transferable model of leadership during crises (Tracy 2013). As such, we were more interested in shared elements and processes than in the particulars of each individual participant's experience. Given our theoretical goal, we asked, what is going on here from a theoretical perspective (Gioia et al. 2013)? During this process, we integrated our more specific first-order descriptive codes, such as “perceiving divided loyalties,” “protecting the organization,” and “protecting subordinates,” into broader, more encompassing second-order themes (Gioia et al. 2013)—in this case, “navigating instrumental and humanistic motives in decision making.”

During this step, we moved between existing literature and our data. We considered whether dominant leadership templates (see DeRue et al. 2011; Hernandez et al. 2011; James et al. 2011 for reviews) helped explain what was emerging from our participants' accounts. For instance, we considered whether participants' reported behaviors fit into a task, relationship, or change framework of leader behaviors (Shen and Joseph 2021) or if there was evidence of transformational and charismatic leadership or of “values-based, uplifting” (Hernandez et al. 2011, 1147) leadership models like ethical and authentic leadership. Further, we considered whether the styles referenced in recent crisis leadership reviews (cf. Collins et al. 2022; Riggio and Newstead 2023; Wu et al. 2021) might fit our findings. We found that (a) not all of our second-order themes fit preexisting models and (b) these models did not fully explain what was happening in participants' responses. When we considered *why* existing models did not fully align with our data, we identified limited agency as a key factor.

2.2.3 | Coding for Limited Agency

During initial rounds of coding, we had categorized limited agency as a second-order theme in our data. Specifically, we found that some responses involved participants reflecting on limits to their agency (e.g., feeling unable to act in ways that align with their values). However, in successive rounds of coding and iterating, we realized that a much larger number of incidents contained direct or implied statements of helplessness and limited agency. In other words, we realized that categorizing limited agency as a second-order theme downplayed its centrality in our participants' incidents and experiences. This was a salient finding for us, since the leadership literature tends to associate leadership with agency (Tourish 2014); thus, we identified limited agency as a key driver of the thoughts, feelings, and actions participants reported in weekly incidents. We decided to pursue this salient aspect of our data by engaging in focused coding of all incidents (Locke, Feldman, and Golden-Biddle 2022) to determine if they implied or directly stated restrictions on agency. Of the 206 incidents we coded, 156 (76%) implied or directly stated limited agency, whereas 50 (24%) did not.¹ (Appendix A contains a detailed description of this coding process.) This limited agency presented a paradox in that participants had to navigate the tension of limited agency in roles presumed to be infused with agency. The paradox of limited agency in a leader role led us to revise our initial research question to incorporate an emergent research question (Easterby-Smith, Golden-Biddle, and Locke 2008): How is leadership enacted during a crisis by female and male leaders against a backdrop of limited agency? We discovered that the answer to this emergent question was informed by participants processing the paradox and then enacting leadership via micro practices, as we describe below.

2.2.4 | Putting the Puzzle Together

During our iterative coding process, we moved between our data and existing literature to identify theoretical (dis)connections. We started to see that the second-order themes could be classified as micro practices (Rouleau 2005) that broadly captured participants' attempts to process the consequence of the limited agency paradox and then enact leadership. These micro practices represent leadership at a granular level; they are the discrete parcels of feelings, thoughts, and actions that took place in the incidents reported by our participants (Rouleau 2005). We went back to check if any of the 206 incidents seemed to deviate from our interpretation (e.g., negative case analysis; Morse 2015) and found only one that did not fit our framework (i.e., that could not be categorized into one of the 10 micro practices we identified).

After we identified the 10 micro practices, the three lead authors discussed multiple theoretical processes and frameworks that might tie it all together. As typical with qualitative findings, we identified several plausible theoretical explanations. We found that the micro practices broadly captured the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral elements of trying to process and enact leadership during a crisis (see Table 2). Specifically, we interpreted the cognitive and emotional micro practices as participants' attempts to *process* the paradox of having limited agency in a presumably agentic role and the behavioral micro practices as participants' efforts to *enact* leadership. These two categories—process and enact—are the “aggregate dimensions” (Gioia et al. 2013) that tie the micro practices (i.e., second-order themes) together. On the whole, our findings offer a more human, rather than idealistic or heroic, view of crisis leadership than previously reported in the crisis leadership literature. This humanized view is evident in participant reflections that include limited agency, doubt, and uncertainty about how to enact leadership during a crisis. The more human view of crisis leadership we uncovered also includes emotion as a central part of processing limited agency and enacting leadership. Emotion references included both positive and negative emotions, as well as those that are typically not associated with power and status (e.g., grief, guilt, and fear).

2.2.5 | Coding for Gender Differences

We collected a total of 236 incidents, nearly half of which were from female leaders ($n=129$; 55%), roughly paralleling the gender breakdown of our sample (see Table 1). Of these 236 incidents, 206 had codable content. The 206 codable incidents resulted in 267 inductively derived micro practices from our framework (e.g., some incidents included multiple micro practices): 113 were from men and 149 were from women (five were from participants who did not report gender). Interestingly, a dualism exists in these gender findings. When we zoom out and view findings from a higher level, we find similarities in how women and men processed the paradox and enacted leadership by *defying idealized leader prototypes*, meaning they approached crisis leadership in a distinctly human (rather than masculine or feminine) manner. However, when we zoom in to consider *how* processing and enacting leadership unfolded, we

find gender differences in the specific micro practices underlying the process (see Figure 2 and Appendices SB1 and SB2). That is, when it comes to crisis leadership, whether we find similarities or differences between men and women depends on the level of detail we are trying to observe. We unpack these findings below.

3 | Findings

Our work focused on an emergent research question: how is leadership enacted during a crisis by female *and* male leaders *against a backdrop of limited agency*? Our findings indicate that the limited agency paradox created a discontinuity and a trigger, setting in motion two interrelated processes that explain how crisis leadership unfolded for our participants. See Table 2 for a list of key definitions and supporting quotes.

3.1 | The Paradox of Limited Agency

The leadership literature and societal discourse often emphasizes agency as a fundamental aspect of being a leader and enacting leadership (see Lanaj, Gabriel, and Chawla 2021; Petriglieri and Peshkam 2022). Our finding challenges this assumption, particularly in times of a crisis such as the one we studied here. We find that many situations curtailed leaders' agency (e.g., government-imposed shutdowns, physical distance from employees, and increased caregiving responsibilities). For example, one participant described experiencing a lack of agency in motivating their team due to an increase in caregiving tasks:

I lead a team of people who are responsible for sharing a report to our larger organization every two weeks. These meetings are important [because] the organization's senior leaders are in attendance and needing the information that we share ... It's more challenging now that we are all remote, but typically about half the team is remote anyway for these meetings. People did not seem to be very engaged this week... I felt they were a bit checked out or 'Zoomed' out. Honestly, I was feeling Zoomed out as I was also trying to homeschool my kids at the same time this meeting was going on. So, you can imagine me facilitating the meeting and asking everyone to continue the conversation while I went over to my kids' rooms to answer questions, troubleshoot technology snafus or just try to keep them on-task ... It was just worn out after the day because I then had to cook dinner and the day was just hard as I did not feel like we had a good discussion for that meeting. I was thinking about it for the remainder of the day. I think we'll be ready for our meeting next week, but I'm going to have to put some more work in on Monday to ensure we are ready. (id = 10, Man, Week 1)

Here, this participant describes what it was like prior to the crisis and notes that being virtual was not the only cause of

TABLE 2 | The micro practices crisis leadership.

Micro Practice (n)	Definition	Example	Gender
<i>Processing consequences of the paradox</i>			
Emotion labeling (34)	Leaders pinpoint the emotional tone in the workgroup or specific emotions they felt or witnessed.	“Honestly, the most demanding and important thing this week has been to really focus on my mental health. I feel myself ebbing and flowing with the news... good reports about returning to normal lead to optimism and excitement... bad reports about returning to normal lead to fear and some depression.”	Men: 11 (32.4%) Women: 23 (67.6%)
Noticing and interpreting the consequences of stressors in the work environment (57)	Leaders notice new stressors and/or interpret their effects for the workgroup.	“The amount of requests coming to the team reached extreme levels. I had to step in to slow things down and enforce using the process to request and fulfill. This impacted multiple groups, my management, requestors, and my staff.”	Men: 26 (45.6%) Women: 30 (52.7%) Not reported: 1
Using metaphors in narratives (19)	Leaders use metaphors to frame an unknown situation into one that is more familiar.	“The reopening has been inconsistently administered across the various geographical areas. For instance, manufacturers in [City X] are still closed, however, parts of [City Y] are opening. We are getting rush orders and bullwhip like demands.”	Men: 11 (58%) Women: 8 (42%)
Questioning and revising leader role identity (20)	The act of questioning what one’s role might entail in the changed circumstances. This questioning could sometimes result in crafting a new role identity and at others in justifying and continuing a previously held role identity.	“My role as a leader seems more elusive than ever. As the ‘Associate’ director, I have oversight over specific projects. However, for the most part, I serve at the pleasure of the Director and the Dean. I have conceptualized this role as a sort of deputy to the director - ensuring that operations continue to run smoothly, things do not get lost between the cracks.”	Men: 7 (35%) Women: 13 (65%)

(Continues)

TABLE 2 | (Continued)

Micro Practice (n)	Definition	Example	Gender
Identifying uncertainty and its impact (35)	This is a future-focused act in which leaders narrated their worries about impending uncertainty, how they might reduce it, resources that were needed, and how it might all turn out.	“We were asked to reconsider the class schedule to take into account reduced classroom capacities and social distancing. The effort we will need to accommodate these concerns seems monumental. Also, I do not think any one of us can predict the health situation in Fall. This may become an ongoing effort of continuing change...”	Men: 20 (57.1%) Women: 15 (42.9%)
<i>Enacting leadership</i>			
Navigating instrumental and humanistic motives in decision making (14)	Leaders navigate tough choices that call for prioritizing either employee health and well-being or the business' bottom line and keeping the doors open.	“A member of my team who reports directly to me was struggling with personal issues. She described it as not well but not physically sick, something like anxiety or depression. I had to figure out how to deal with the situation to help her as a person while still meeting business objectives.”	Men: 5 (35.7%) Women: 9 (64.3%)
Interpersonal emotion management (IEM) (12)	Leaders manage the negative emotions of their stakeholders.	“This week one of my soldiers lost a family member and called on me for support. I have no formal training on grievance counseling but was able to talk to this soldier and calm him down.”	Men: 4 (33.3%) Women: 8 (66.7%)
Communicating adverse news (13)	Leaders share negative decisions/scenarios (e.g., furloughs and cuts) with followers or other stakeholder groups.	“This week I had to inform one of my staff that a backfill position that is critical to his area has been cut. He was in the process of interviewing candidates and had just found 2 good potential candidates we would have made an offer to had it not been for these cuts.”	Men: 6 (46.2%) Women: 6 (46.2%) Not reported: 1
Trying to create a shared reality (22)	Leaders try to instill a shared understanding with followers or other stakeholder groups (about tasks, goals, and how work could be executed).	“My team is extremely involved with fiscal year end at the campus and state level. Reminding those on my team ‘how’ they are involved or impact fiscal year end should be routine as most of the staff on my team have been through fiscal year end.”	Men: 5 (22.7%) Women: 16 (72.7%) Not reported: 1

(Continues)

TABLE 2 | (Continued)

Micro Practice (n)	Definition	Example	Gender
Crafting new work routines to navigate crisis (39)	Adapting or making changes to work and organizational routines.	“We are working on [a] reopening plan for my department and I needed to work with my department to determine who and when they would return to the building to complete critical tasks for our department.”	Men: 16 (41.0%) Women: 21 (53.8%) Not reported: 2

Note. 206 total coded incidents. Each incident could be coded in multiple micro practices. For example, an incident that included a metaphor and also labeled an emotion would be coded under emotion labeling and using metaphors in narratives.

disengagement (“It’s more challenging now that we’re all remote, but typically about half the team is remote anyway for these meetings”). They go on to describe why the situation is challenging, referencing their own fatigue from having to care for children around the clock. This new responsibility creates a discontinuity in their experience of being a leader, reducing autonomy and placing severe constraints on agency. It is not our goal here to investigate if such limited agency was objectively present. Instead, it is our observation, based on our coding, that the paradox of experiencing limited agency in a presumably agentic role is a key trigger to participants’ processing the situation (“I was thinking about it for the remainder of the day”) and enacting leadership (“I’m going to have to put some more work in on Monday to ensure we are ready”).

We found that participants acknowledged their limited agency to varying degrees. On one end of the spectrum, participants directly identified their lack of agency:

... One of the individuals let go has been my mentee - I thought she would have had a sense that this was coming...She did not. She asked if I knew anything. I am in the middle here without much agency to act in a way that aligns with my beliefs. (id = 13, Woman, Week 5)

In other cases, participants did not directly call out their lack of agency but did use language that heavily implied it:

I found out this week that there are organizational changes coming that will *require me* to reduce staff and eliminate management levels. The first stage is that nearly all of our open positions have been cut, regardless of status. This week *I had to* inform one of my staff that a backfill position that is critical to his area has been cut. (id = 6, Woman, Week 7, italics added for emphasis)

These findings do not appear to have been strongly driven by gender. Once we consider the gender breakdown of our sample, it appears that men and women were perceiving limited agency at similar rates (42.58% of limited agency incidents were from men and 55.48% were from women). As such, we can cautiously advance the theoretical proposition that when faced with a crisis, both female and male leaders experience limited agency, which represents a discontinuity in their experience of enacting leadership.

It is important to note that we use the term “limited” because leaders still have agency to think, feel, and act differently and in ways that might impact their environment; thus, their agency is limited but not completely lacking. The notion of limited agency moves us away from an idealized portrait of leadership where agency is total and (positive) outcomes are guaranteed (Fischer, Dietz, and Antonakis 2024; Tourish 2014). Against this paradox and the question of how to lead with limited agency, we identified two overarching themes with 10 subthemes (i.e., micro practices) within. The two main themes describe participants **processing** the consequences of the paradox and **enacting** leadership.

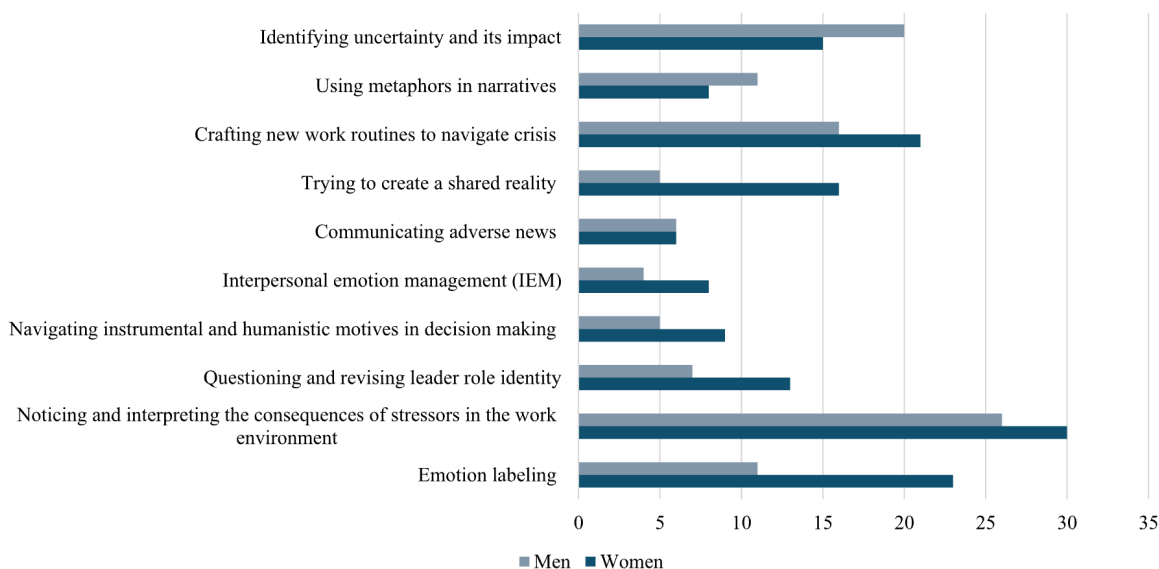


FIGURE 2 | Gender differences: Mirroring the leader prototype versus rooted in context.

3.1.1 | Processing the Consequences of the Paradox

“Processing” micro practices refers to participants' attempts to unpack and navigate the complex emotions and thoughts they and others in their span of influence experienced. We suggest that the paradox of experiencing limited agency in a leader role created a situation where participants had no “playbook” to follow. This lack of clear guidelines meant they had to consider their own leadership schema and role identity. That is, triggered by the paradox of limited agency, our participants experienced complex emotions and thoughts and then had to create coherence to find a way forward. We found that they did so by engaging in the five micro practices described below.

3.1.1.1 | Emotion Labeling. Participants engaged in emotion labeling by naming the emotions they experienced and observed in their environment (David 2016; Torre and Lieberman 2018). Here, leaders pinpointed the emotional tone in the workgroup or specific emotions they felt or witnessed (Gratz and Roemer 2004; Vine and Aldao 2014; Yu, Berg, and Zlatev 2021), including negative emotions such as fear, frustration, and sadness (Maitlis, Vogus, and Lawrence 2013). For example, one participant (id = 10, Man, Week 1) expressed frustration due to how they perceived others were acting in an important meeting: “People did not seem to be very engaged this week. Only one or two people were sharing in the meeting and that was frustrating to me.”

Deviating from earlier works that mostly focus on negative emotions, we found leaders also experienced positive emotions like love, surprise, compassion, optimism, and excitement. Further, participants acknowledged their emotional ambivalence (i.e., the co-occurrence of positive and negative emotions; Rothman and Melwani 2017) via emotion labeling, as one participant adeptly described (id = 2, Man, Week 4, emphasis added): “I feel myself ebbing and flowing with the news...good reports about returning to normal lead to *optimism and excitement*.... bad reports about returning to normal lead to *fear* and some *depression* ...”

Within the emotion labeling category, leaders also described situations, events, and other people's negative and positive emotions. These were not the leaders' own emotions, as previous research has explored (e.g., Maitlis, Vogus, and Lawrence 2013); rather, leaders spoke of events, interpersonal interactions, or scenarios laced with emotion.

3.1.1.2 | Noticing and Interpreting the Consequences of Stressors. Whereas emotion labeling describes how participants felt and how they interpreted what others were feeling, noticing and interpreting the consequences of stressors captures participants' interpretations of the most challenging stressors in their environment and their narrative of the impact of those stressors. In this micro practice, leaders first recognized and identified the stressors or obstacles they encountered—such as new organizational protocols and bringing people who were furloughed back to work—and then took time to reflect on and interpret those challenges. Leaders articulated how they were facing difficulty in relaying layoff decisions, seeking human connection, experiencing work–family conflicts, dealing with fatigue, handling concerns about the well-being of their teams, and experiencing the loss of livelihood. For example, this leader described their work overload:

With [a colleague] out, I had to assume [their] role on top of continuing to direct my teams [sic] weekly work. Being thrown into completing this work with little direction on what the final product needed to look like was difficult and required almost all of my time over two days which was very difficult for my family while stuck at home. (id = 1, Man, Week 1).

This participant is identifying and highlighting the challenge of assuming additional roles with little direction (i.e., role overload and role ambiguity). Further, they are interpreting the consequences of the stressors by noting the impact that these work

challenges place not only on themselves but on their family as well.

3.1.1.3 | Identifying Uncertainty and Its Impact. While the previous micro practice is present focused, identifying uncertainty and its impact is a future-focused cognition in which leaders narrate their worries about impending uncertainty, consider how they might reduce it, and predict how it might turn out. For example, one leader noted:

The university will return to face-to-face (F2F) instruction in the fall semester. For that to be possible, our faculty need to agree to teach on-campus in the Fall. The public health situation is uncertain. We need to make sure faculty understand they are empowered to make the decision about their own return-to-campus. We need to inspire trust in measures the University is preparing even though as of now we do not know what they will be. (id = 36, Man, Week 3).

This incident illustrates the leader's awareness of the uncertainty surrounding the return to face-to-face instruction. Here, the leader discusses the need for faculty to make independent decisions about returning to campus, recognizing the complexity and challenges of navigating the unpredictable nature of a public health crisis. At the same time, the leader emphasizes the importance of fostering trust, even though the specific safety measures are not yet known.

In some cases, participants tried to predict what might happen in the coming weeks or months in order to craft a coherent narrative for themselves that provided some clarity about the future. Given the preponderance of stressors and the lack of agency, these forecasts were often pessimistic or neutral in tenor. Specifically, over two thirds (68%) of the reported incidents that involved predicting the future were negatively connoted, with leaders expressing worry about the future and predicting adverse outcomes. For example, one participant described:

We were awarded the PPP loan, so we have certain qualifications we must meet, such as maintaining the same Head Count from prior to COVID19. Unfortunately, I do not expect participation (revenue) to stay at the same level, so I do not know how I can bring everyone back. (id = 2, Man, Week 1).

3.1.1.4 | Metaphors. Whereas the three micro practices above involve what participants were feeling and thinking, the use of metaphors worked to translate the unfamiliar, unknown environmental context into a more manageable and familiar domain. For example, one participant (id = 13, Woman, Week 6) discussed an opportunity using a sports metaphor: "Took the ball and ran with the grant application for the COVID-19 Summer Learning. Coordinated details for proposal, engaged with others across campus, put together the conceptual framework for this project." Similarly, another participant used the metaphor of decimation, signaling death or decline and drawing attention to the severity of the challenge at hand:

The event that stands out is reviewing payroll, employees, PPP loan proceeds remaining and other financial factors influencing what we do next. I work in an industry (corporate events) that has been decimated (not too strong a word) by COVID-19. We need to find a way to manage our resources and make it through this. (id = 42, Man, Week 5).

These strategies of uncertainty reduction and metaphor usage represent attempts to bring back some agency and order by predicting the future and creating meaning. By comparing their situation to something they already knew, leaders were striving to bridge the gap between unknown and familiar territory.

3.1.1.5 | Questioning and Revising Leader Role Identity. Finally, participants often questioned what their role might entail in the changed circumstances of the crisis context. This questioning could result in crafting a new role identity or in trying to maintain an existing role identity. Previous research has identified the ambiguous nature of a leader's role during crises (Day, Harrison, and Halpin 2009; Epitropaki et al. 2017; Maitlis and Christianson 2014). Likewise, we found that leaders reflected on their role and tried to define it in a way that provided some sense for them:

My role as a leader seems more elusive than ever. As the 'Associate' director, I have oversight over specific projects. However, for the most part, I serve at the pleasure of the Director and the Dean. I have conceptualized this role as a sort of deputy to the director - ensuring that operations continue to run smoothly, things do not get lost between the cracks. (id = 13, Woman, Week 3).

In this micro practice, we see our participants trying to author their role and define its boundaries. The crafting of a leader's role identity is a key part of *becoming* a leader, which can then set into motion the visible *doing* of leadership (e.g., Lanaj, Gabriel, and Chawla 2021).

3.1.2 | Enacting Leadership

The enactment of leadership in a crisis context, while operating with a sense of limited agency, involved leaders engaging in five action-focused micro practices, which we go on to describe and explore below.

3.1.2.1 | Interpersonal Emotion Management. The first behaviorally focused micro practice, interpersonal emotion management (IEM) (Little et al. 2012; Little, Gooty, and Williams 2016; Troth et al. 2018), refers to managing the negative emotions of stakeholders (Little et al. 2012; Little, Gooty, and Williams 2016). This behavior involves leader actions that directly aim to quell worry, fear, anger, sadness, or grief via reappraisal, reframing, listening, or redirecting the negative emotions. For example, one leader (id = 22, Woman, Week 1) noted: "This week one of my soldiers lost a family member and called

on me for support. I have no formal training on grievance counseling but was able to talk to this soldier and calm him down.” Another participant tried to manage the emotions of their chief operating officer:

We discovered a long term employee had violated a very important and long-standing policy. Under normal circumstances this was grounds for termination. Under the current circumstances her actions could have put others in serious danger. The COO was furious. I had to step in and help triage the situation and settle down tempers. (id = 53, Man, Week 4).

3.1.2.2 | Navigating Instrumental and Humanistic Motives in Decision Making. This second and related micro practice reflected choices that required either prioritizing employee health and well-being *or* keeping the business open and profitable. We found that leaders often conceptualized the crisis context as creating or perpetuating such difficult decisions. In each case, decision making was centered around choices that inevitably favored certain individuals or interests over others. For example, one participant reported negotiating conflicting priorities of safety and keeping the business operational:

Once the ‘Stay Home’ order was issued by [State] Governor, I have to make a decision balancing the safety of our 500 employees and the well-being of [our Company], a manufacturer of battery components with [X] plants, one in [City X] and one in [City Y]. Eventually, I made the decision to apply for exemption from the order because [our Company] is an essential business for the country and for the fight against Covid-19. We kept the plants running without interruption. (id = 5, Man, Week 1)

Another participant grappled with the conflict between helping a direct report and getting the job done:

A member of my team who reports directly to me was struggling with personal issues. She described it as not well but not physically sick, something like anxiety or depression. I had to figure out how to deal with the situation to help her as a person while still meeting business objectives.

(id = 6, Woman, Week 4)

3.1.2.3 | Communicating Adverse News. In this micro practice, leaders shared negative decisions/scenarios (e.g., furloughs and cuts) with subordinates or other stakeholder groups. Some of our participants called out the impact the news had or would have on individuals and teams, and many also expressed a sense of regret about having to deliver such difficult information. For instance, one participant described explaining to staff that positions had been cut:

This week I had to inform one of my staff that a backfill position that is critical to his area has been cut. He was in the process of interviewing candidates and had just found 2 good potential candidates we would have made an offer to had it not been for these cuts. (id = 6, Woman, Week 7)

Another leader shared:

Teaching applied music (one-on-one lessons) and ensembles in a collegiate department of music are the core of instruction for developing musicians. With the COVID-19 pandemic and the nature of singing and playing wind instruments, it is too dangerous (unhealthy) for applied music in most of our areas to take place in the fall. The research that came out this week about this and with ensemble teaching is suggesting that even social distancing may not be enough: there is no safe way to have applied lessons in voice, winds, and brass nor in choral and instrumental ensembles. Passing this information along to the faculty has been a blow to the semester’s plans in performance, student degree recitals, and chamber music. Most of our faculty are feeling unsafe and still want to make sure that there is student progress being made. I have internalized their disappointment in this, and the ensemble directors are not sure of how to teach in this new era. (id = 40, Man, Week 1)

This participant is reporting having to deliver news that adversely impacts others, acknowledging the effect that the crisis is having on faculty (e.g., feeling unsafe) and students (e.g., not making progress) and describing how they are “internalizing” those stakeholders’ disappointments. Even when leaders did not explicitly call out the impact the adverse news would have, all incidents in this micro practice involved passing along bad news to others.

3.1.2.4 | Trying to Create a Shared Reality. Leaders also attempted to create a shared reality (Gooty and Yammario 2016) by instilling a mutual understanding with subordinates or other stakeholder groups about tasks, goals, and how work could be executed. Participants talked about trying to create a shared understanding about novel work hours, routines, and work structures (e.g., working virtually), explaining why they were necessary and how they ensured the health and viability of the unit/organization. For example, the participant below tried to create a shared reality with their team of employees by ensuring everyone was aligned and informed about a technological update and its consequences:

This past weekend, there was an update by Technology to our main tool (a system of record). There were ramifications from that update that is impacting data, requiring me to update to my staff as well as consumers and partners to not use the

data. I also needed to influence decisions on how to communicate and remediate the problem. (id=6, Woman, Week 1)

3.1.2.5 | Crafting New Work Routines to Navigate Crises.

In this last action-focused micro practice, leaders discussed adapting or making changes to work and organizational routines. In these incidents, leaders described how they were planning for return to work (e.g., operational capacity and spatial distancing) or restructuring work routines due to the evolving work environment (e.g., changing routines to adjust to remote work). The purpose of these activities was to create conditions that facilitated task/goal accomplishment. For example, one leader (id=16, Woman, Week 4) described: "...working on [a] reopening plan for my department ... to determine who and when they would return to the building to complete critical tasks for our department." Another participant (id=34, Woman, Week 1) mulled over safety and bringing people back to work: "... Figuring out what would make the employees feel comfortable and safe coming back as a full team. Replanning the floor, scheduling, and purchase order demand flow for the new product."

Next, we explore and unpack gender similarities and differences in the ways participants processed and enacted their leader roles.

3.2 | The Dualism of Gender Similarities and Differences

While focusing on *how* participants processed and enacted leadership under limited agency, we concurrently investigated whether or not there were gender differences at play. Our findings are described below.

3.2.1 | Gender Similarities: Defying the Idealized Leader Prototype

First, keeping in mind that the coding team was initially agnostic to gender, we found that our theoretical explanation applied to male *and* female leaders (see Table 2). Both men and women experienced the paradox of limited agency in a role assumed to be agentic, and both faced the need to adapt to and make sense of the complexities and uncertainties of their role in this crisis context, thus processing and enacting leadership under these conditions. Consider the following two examples. Although the *specifics* are different (as we discuss below), the *general* process is similar:

In our weekly staff meeting our director asked all of us to contribute to a shared document with ideas for fall programming in light of COVID-19. In thinking about my own ideas, *I started to feel hesitant coming up with ideas* when we, as a program, had not created a list of responsible practices to mitigate the risks of COVID-19 ... I subsequently contact my other employee to *see how he was feeling and he indicated he had similar reservations* ... I decided I needed

to talk to my director about the collective need. I created a document compiling responsible practices using notes from webinars, conversations, training etc and emailed it to him as a way of expressing the concern. *The challenge was in getting the message across in a way that the director could hear as he can be defensive* (id=23, Woman, Week 7; italics added for emphasis).

In this incident, the leader expresses doubts about ideas, checking in to see how their employee was feeling. They then express a desire to create a shared reality about doubts and hesitation for their director while noting their limited agency in crafting an effective message (i.e., "*getting the message across in a way that the director could hear as he can be defensive*").

Another participant, a male leader, writes about the impact of uncertainty on morale, attempting to create a shared understanding and yet concluding with an admission of limits to their agency:

Several days ago, I received an email from a colleague. He expressed concerns about rumors circling among faculty and staff which mention furloughs, difficulties in making decisions to come back to campus, uncertainty about teaching in the Fall, security (longevity) of our contracts. *It is not surprising that the crisis is starting to impact the morale of the faculty and staff* ... The upcoming uncertainty, the need for everyone to make their own decisions about health and safety, the lack of a model to follow. *I replied to my colleague with all information I have available and some what-if scenarios. I managed to separate misinformation from the unknowns.* But every attempt at communication at this time is open ended. It only identifies more questions and *shows how few answers we have* (id=36, Man, Week 1; italics added for emphasis)

These gender similarities are consistent with a humanized view of crisis leadership, deviating from idealized leader and idealized gender templates. This commonality in experience highlights that, although specific responses and strategies may differ, the core mechanisms of processing and enacting crisis leadership apply for both men and women.

3.2.2 | Gender Differences: Mirroring the Leader Prototype Versus Rooted in Context

When we zoom in to consider the nuances of how women and men processed and enacted crisis leadership, we see that, although their narratives were both more human than the idealized models suggest, the focus of their dominant narratives diverged.

Men favored two cognitively based micro practices: (a) using metaphors in narratives and (b) identifying uncertainty and its impact (see Figure 2 and Appendices SB1 and SB2). Notably, male leaders used metaphors and identified uncertainty more frequently than female leaders, accounting for 58% of the former and 57% of the latter in our sample. These two categories in particular reflect what many leadership theories consider the core of “being” a leader. For example, using metaphors or symbolic meaning is a central part of transformational leadership theory’s idealized influence and vision making (Bass and Riggio 2006; Van Knippenberg and Sitkin 2013). Symbolic communication is also at the core of charismatic leadership, both in older versions and in more recent reformulations (e.g., Antonakis et al. 2016). For example, when envisioning the future, one male leader (id = 28, week 2) noted: “There are significant complexities involved in this as we face something so unprecedented that there is no real roadmap.” This male leader uses a metaphor—the absence of a roadmap—to convey the uncertainty and complexity of the path forward (i.e., an uncertain vision of the future).

The focus of male leaders can best be described as *mirroring the leader prototype* (Vongswasdi et al. 2024), but not the idealized leader prototype. Mirroring a dominant prototype is typically associated with people experiencing image-discrepant information (e.g., female minority entrepreneurs in a startup context; Vongswasdi et al. 2024). Men typically fit the leader prototype, but in a crisis context they experience limited agency, which presents a roadblock to acting like a leader. When faced with this discrepancy, men seem to mirror what the leader prototype typically entails, attempting to minimize uncertainty and ambiguity for themselves and for those around them. For example, one male leader reflected on layoff decisions by internally verifying that they were necessary:

All are valued members of the team, but, costs have to be cut and those are based on need to have and not nice to have. This is challenging in that all of the people will be difficult to replace if it is determined in time that the roles are again needed. Additionally, it will be more expensive replacing the individuals.
(id = 7, Man, Week 2)

Here, this leader acknowledges difficulties ahead, but reduces the ambiguity of the layoff decision by emphasizing its necessity. Reducing uncertainty is considered a core leadership function. From a social identity theory lens (Van Knippenberg 2011), researchers have found that leaders who are prototypical (e.g., men) are more trusted during times of change or turbulence because they represent the familiar and are thus expected to create stability and reduce uncertainty (e.g., Hogg, van Knippenberg, and Rast 2012). Our participants, especially men, might be choosing prototypical leader activities to reduce the ambiguity in their role created by the paradox of experiencing limited agency (Hogg 2007). Their more frequent engagement in the micro practice of identifying uncertainty and its impact highlights their slant toward mirroring the leader prototype by reducing risks, forecasting the future, and trying to bring stability to an unstable context.

The preferred micro practices of women reveal a slant toward a *rooted in context* focus—in other words, the theme inherent in the micro practices overrepresented by women is contextual awareness. Emotions, for instance, stem from and provide information about what is happening in one’s surroundings (Niedenthal and Brauer 2012; Scherer and Moors 2019; Van Kleef 2010). Over two thirds (68%) of incidents in the emotion labeling micro practice came from women. Similarly, women noticed and interpreted the consequences of the stressors in the work environment more so (53%) than their male counterparts (46%). Female leaders reflected on maintaining or updating their leader role identity more frequently than men: 65% of incidents falling within the questioning and revising leader role identity micro practice were from women. Each of these micro practices are imbued with contextual clues. For example, one woman (id = 13, week 8) shared: “For me, it continues to be the sum of all the little-ish things that are, in total, significant. I remain behind-the-scenes, picking up the pieces, making sure things don’t fall between the cracks and, in general, keep things going.” Her reflection shows attentiveness to context, recognizing how small tasks add up to a meaningful whole. It also highlights how women often questioned and revised their leader role identity in response to contextual cues.

Further, the majority of incidents in the five action-focused micro practices came from female leaders: 64% navigated instrumental and humanistic motives in decision making, 67% engaged in interpersonal emotion management, 73% attempted to create a shared reality, and 54% crafted new work routines to navigate crises. Interpersonal emotion management and creating a shared reality are meant to control and manage one’s immediate socio-relational context, and crafting new work routines is directly responsive to context. For example, one woman (id = 6, week 6) noted: “This week I had to speak on another round of audit calls to try to correct misunderstandings, representing our area which was under scrutiny. I had to speak to a lot of details to people within my own area and audit who are not as familiar with the details but were in charge of representing the topic or evaluating the results.” This quote illustrates how female leaders actively manage their socio-relational context by addressing misunderstandings, creating shared understanding, and responding to immediate challenges, reflecting key themes of interpersonal emotion management, shared reality creation, and adapting work routines during crises. As such, we believe women skew toward a leadership focus that is rooted in context; that is, our female participants’ leadership was more often in response or relation to contextual factors.

Together, these findings reveal gender differences in how women and men processed the paradox of limited agency and subsequently enacted leadership. Although both men and women engaged in all 10 of the micro practices we identified, they appear to associate different meanings with being a leader: women demonstrated a focus that aligns with being responsive to and shaping their context, and men demonstrated a focus on mirroring the leader prototype. We flesh out these findings below.

4 | Discussion

We set out to study how leadership is enacted (i.e., leader behaviors) during crisis contexts due to the challenges discussed

earlier (e.g., idealized leader norms and a preponderance of male leader samples in theories of leadership). Through our inductive work, we developed a theoretical framework of crisis leadership that explains how leadership unfolded for both women and men in an ongoing, unprecedented crisis context. This framework begins with the notion of limited agency, an experience that presents a paradox for those occupying leader roles. The leader role is one that is highly desirable, positive, imbued with agency, and clearly consequential, especially in highly uncertain contexts such as crises (McBride et al. 2024). The limited agency paradox that our participants experienced set into motion a conflict with their expectations for agency and triggered a discontinuity and a tension that needed to be resolved or at least acknowledged prior to enacting leadership. The process that unfolded is best explained via two dimensions: processing the consequences of the paradox and enacting leadership.

Our theoretical framework implies at least three new ideas that deviate from the dominant body of work in crisis leadership and gender. First, both men and women experience restrictions on their leader role, and neither gender acts in ways that are idealized. Women are not inherently more communal, selfless, or empathetic, and men are not bravely leading the troops into success or safety (e.g., Collins et al. 2022). Instead, they described via their narratives of leadership a struggle to chart a reasonable (but not perfect) path forward. This finding presents a theoretical counterfactual to dominant idealized templates that could be empirically tested in the future.

Second, the theoretical insight we derived here around humanizing leadership is quite similar to the leader development process described by Hammond, Clapp-Smith, and Palanski (2017) as a continuous journey of *becoming* a leader, sparked by either planned, minor, and positive experiences (such as attending a leadership training program) or unplanned, major, and challenging events in any area of life (such as job loss or becoming a parent). The crisis we studied here fits the latter category: an unplanned, major, and challenging event that forced an (abbreviated) development process of processing leadership against the backdrop of a paradox and then enacting it. In this regard, while Hammond, Clapp-Smith, and Palanski's (2017) theory is about *being* a leader and thus claiming a stable leader identity, our framework is about enacting leadership and thus engaging in much more role-based identity construction (e.g., self-view of the leader role: Pazzaglia et al. 2024) and enactment. Intriguingly, and novel to the crisis leadership literature, men adopted more of a "being a leader" stance by closely mirroring a leader prototype, whereas women adopted more of a "doing leadership" stance by engaging in micro practices that questioned their role in response to context and then enacting leadership.

Moreover, male and female leaders likely also differ in the meanings they associate with leadership, especially when faced with the paradox of limited agency, which might explain differences in the types of events that stood out as significant and worth writing about when reflecting on their critical events for the week. As Hammond, Clapp-Smith, and Palanski (2017) theorized, if leaders associate certain meanings with leadership, they will then deploy those meanings in interpreting and enacting the leader role. When comparing the micro practices overrepresented in women's incidents to those overrepresented in men's

incidents, a clear difference in meanings emerges. Men tended to draw upon the leader prototype, aligning with conventional meanings and expectations traditionally associated with a leadership role (e.g., use of metaphors in charismatic leadership: See Antonakis et al. 2016). In contrast, women leaned more heavily on contextual cues, using situational factors to shape and define their leadership role in real time before actively enacting it. This distinction suggests men may anchor their leadership in established leadership norms, whereas women often adapt and innovate based on the demands of their environment or the situation (Fletcher 2004).

Third, our framework has the advantage of being more realistic, as it was developed using both men's and women's narratives about the active process of leadership. This contrasts with most previous theoretical frameworks in crisis leadership, which primarily rely on retrospective accounts of follower perceptions of a male leader. In so doing, we discovered that while simplistic, gender essentialist, and idealized templates might be enticing, the work of leadership is more nuanced than such arguments lead us to believe. For example, it could be tempting to view the preponderance of emotion labeling and interpersonal emotion management (IEM) by female leaders as reflective of superior trait empathy or a communal, selfless focus, as previous crisis leadership works suggest (see Eichenauer et al. 2022; Sergent and Stajkovic 2020). Yet emotion labeling is an activity that can be taught and is not the same as trait empathy or simply caring about other people; instead, it involves deciphering emotion information (e.g., feeling fear might prompt aggressive behaviors, whereas feeling grief or sadness might cause withdrawal). The extent to which this information is decoded accurately by the female leaders in our study indicates their responsiveness to emotion information (i.e., signals) in their environment. Similarly, their slant toward trying to create a shared reality might be confused with a focus on community or on bringing people together because women are more communal. However, it could also represent a more strategic goal of creative cognitive shifts in followers such that they are aligned with how the focal leader thinks, acts, or feels about the ongoing crisis and how work is to be done (Foldy, Goldman, and Ospina 2008). Such a strategy is often used by leaders when they seek to draw attention to what the leader does (e.g., behaviors) rather than who they are (e.g., gender, personality, or traits of leaders) (Fletcher 2004).

Importantly, we do not believe that the contextual focus of female leaders is a weakness; rather, it aligns with a more humanized or realistic view of leadership, where leaders do not "have all the answers" nor operate with full control or agency, especially during times of uncertainty (i.e., a crisis). In fact, this contextual focus may be a strength and reflect a strategic resource in such circumstances, where leaders ponder the existential dimension (i.e., their role as a leader) before taking action (Petriglieri and Peshkam 2022). This is not to say that the prototypical focus of male leaders is inferior or that they lack this contextual focus entirely. Indeed, a prototypical focus could be beneficial in an environment where fast action and organization is needed or when there is little time for reflection on one's leader-role dilemma. Future empirical work could ascertain the effectiveness of each focus and consider their effects when used in combination across various contexts, times (e.g., pre-, during, or post-crisis), and situations. For now, our work has raised the

theoretical possibility that leaders might enact leadership in ways that are at odds with the *idealized* notions of being a leader during a crisis.

Relatedly, dominant heroic leadership templates failed to emerge in our findings. Instead, the types of leadership enacted via the predominant contextual and prototypical foci signal the humanizing of a concept associated with heroic status (Petriglieri and Peshkam 2022). This humanizing dimension was evident in participants' lack of agency, in their concerns with the safety of both themselves and their workgroups (as reflected in emotion labeling and uncertainty reduction), and in their grappling over not knowing the right path ahead. In fact, this dimension seems to contradict the idealized, heroic notions of crisis leadership (e.g., Collins et al. 2022) because it reflects ambiguity, doubt, and uncertainty about if and how one enacts leadership during a crisis. Similar to others in the broader leadership domain (Alvesson and Spicer 2010; Petriglieri and Peshkam 2022), we find that being a leader during highly uncertain times entails trial and error, mundane activities, fear, stress, and ambiguity. References to idealized leader behaviors that include vision (1/206 incidents), charisma (0/206), inspiration (1/206), courage and resilience (0/206), protection (1/206), and empathy (0/206) were not apparent in our data.

In summary, in response to our question of how leadership is enacted in crisis contexts, we generated a framework suggesting that a crisis creates a paradoxical agency dilemma for those occupying leader roles. This paradox then triggers an ongoing process comprising two themes: processing the consequences of this paradox and then enacting leadership.

4.1 | Theoretical and Practical Implications

Our work offers several contributions to crisis leadership and gender literatures. First, our work aligns with arguments against an excessively positive or idealized view of leadership, particularly in times of crises or uncertainty (Alvesson 2020; Fischer and Sitkin 2022). Heroic and post-heroic views of leadership often assume it to be naturally aligned with agency (Tourish 2014), but our findings suggest instead that leadership, particularly in a crisis context, is an activity usually carried out in conditions of limited agency. This dimension of our findings opens up the theoretical possibility that acting in ways that are not idealized and acknowledging one's limited agency allows leaders to cope with external events that are largely out of their control (such as mask mandates, shutdowns, and mandatory downsizing). Many previous reviews and works in leadership, especially in the leader behavior literature, have at times tried to cast one behavioral style as the magic bullet for effective leadership (e.g., Collins et al. 2022; Riggio and Newstead 2023; Wu et al. 2021). Our findings indicate that such a prescription could be premature and perhaps even harmful when it comes to a leadership development perspective. In fact, we speculate that outdated theoretical notions of leadership that are practically impossible to attain could be dangerous, as others around the focal leader expect conformity yet no single leader can display such idealized behaviors at all times. By broadening the scope of crisis leadership theory via a sample of both men and women,

we have raised the theoretical possibility that the work of leaders is encapsulated in an average human experience fraught with limited agency, conflicting priorities, and an array of emotions: joy, love, surprise, interest, and hope combined with fear, worry, sadness, grief, guilt, and anger.² Whether and when this humanistic approach to leadership is effective is a matter for future empirical testing.

Next, our work contributes to the scholarly conversation in gender and leadership. We found both men and women were partaking in similar processes and actions throughout the duration of our study; our framework applied for both men and women in our sample of leaders. This aligns with the literature that finds women and men are more similar than different in their leadership practices (Vecchio 2002). Our findings extend this notion to the crisis context, suggesting broad similarities in how men and women lead through crises.

That said, gender differences did emerge in the more fine-grained micro practices. Emotion labeling, both in the self and others, has adaptive consequences for the management of the stress response, psychopathy, and interpersonal relational outcomes (Gratz and Roemer 2004; Vine and Aldao 2014). Acknowledging emotions, especially negative ones, is an adaptive strategy because it helps one regulate the physiological and motivational consequences of such emotions and does not cause repression. In child psychology, emotion labeling is used as one aspect of emotion coaching because identifying emotions helps with functional and adaptive coping and the development of high-quality social relationships (e.g., Gus, Rose, and Gilbert 2015). Through this micro practice as well as others—including interpersonal emotion management, noticing and interpreting stressors, and revising the leader role (see Figure 2)—women appear to gravitate more toward an active construction of the leader role than men do. We speculate that female leaders employ this existential approach to leading as a functional coping response to crisis. This theoretical implication perhaps explains the female advantage in crisis more so than transformational leadership behaviors (Wu et al. 2021) and could be a fruitful avenue for exploration in future empirical work.

For example, a majority of women's leadership training and development programs are designed with an underlying assumption that women must *do leadership* differently in order to be effective. We suspect these programs are not teaching participants to embrace doubts and worries and then craft their leader roles in relation to context (cf. Fletcher 2004). Rather, they were developed based on masculine leadership theories and heroic styles as noted earlier, and as such presumptively teach women how to act like a prototypical leader (e.g., metaphor usage). Our work raises the theoretical notion that perhaps we, as a society and in business, might consider training programs for *followers* to perceive the rooted-in-context micro practices, laced with limited agency, as strengths rather than weaknesses. This would shift the focus from training women to enact leader behaviors and competencies that mimic male leaders to building systems that redefine the leader role in more inclusive ways (cf. Fletcher 2004). It is quite possible that doing so might begin to shift the implicit leadership theories (ILTs) in business and society over a long period of time.

4.2 | Limitations and Future Research Directions

Our work has limitations that create opportunities for future research. First, our study took place during early lockdowns in the United States due to the global COVID-19 pandemic. This pandemic stood out from other crisis contexts due to its unparalleled global scale, emphasizing an unprecedented and pervasive public health challenge that affected nearly every nation simultaneously. However, we need additional research to understand whether our and others' findings generalize across crises or if they are unique to specific types. Future research might address this idea by building theory or conducting empirical work using archival data that focuses on multiple, distinct crises.

Second, our study attempted to cross contexts by including a variety of participants from different organizations across various occupations, demographics, and ranks. This is both a strength and a weakness. We were not able to deeply explore the nuances of each leader's experiences in the way that one might using a case study methodology. Yet we were able to capture the lived experiences of *both* male and female leaders at various levels and professions over time. Additionally, our participants were predominately white leaders (80%) from the United States (96.4%), resulting in a largely homogenous sample. Moreover, while our focus on gender is consistent with the large number of women in the workforce and the fact that achieving gender equality continues to be one of the grand challenges facing society at large (Offermann et al. 2020), we acknowledge that other gender identities are worthy of investigation. To address these limitations, future research should explore leadership dynamics outside the United States and actively incorporate more diverse racial and gender perspectives. By doing so, we can challenge and reshape the assumptions that underpin existing leadership theories, fostering a more globally relevant understanding of crisis leadership.

The overarching themes and micro practices in our work can best be viewed as a leader-centric view of leadership during a crisis. Theories of leadership have long been built exclusively from follower and peer accounts, including more recent and newer leadership frameworks. This follower- or peer-centered view of leadership neglects the central actor in leadership: the leader (Aguinis et al. 2022). This is indeed a strength of our work, as we were able to capture and analyze the perspective of the leader in a time of uncertainty and ambiguity (i.e., a crisis context).

Additionally, our work highlights areas where emotion research could be more fully integrated with leadership research. Previous research in emotions, sensemaking, and leadership acknowledges that leaders have to manage the negative emotions that arise out of crisis situations (Dionne et al. 2018; Gooty et al. 2010; Maitlis, Vogus, and Lawrence 2013). Some researchers have suggested that the emotional culture or affective climate of an organization is more important than climate based on cognitions (e.g., values, norms, and assumptions; Barsade and O'Neill 2014, 2016). However, there is very little work that tells us *how* such emotion-based leadership (e.g., Ashkanasy et al. 2017) can be implemented. We identified two categories that begin to uncover what these specific themes might be—specifically, emotion labeling and, in particular, interpersonal

emotion management (IEM) (Little, Gooty, and Williams 2016; Yu, Berg, and Zlatev 2021). Importantly, we do not see these emotion findings as simply gender-prototypical behaviors. Rather, female leaders could be deploying certain emotion management behaviors in strategic ways not only to derive contextual information but also to shape their context, as noted earlier. In this way, they are creating cognitive shifts (via a shared reality) while also attempting strategic emotion shifts. Viewed from this theoretical angle, female leaders might be shaping and controlling how their followers think *and* feel in a much more active manner.

Finally, our work could spur future investigation into the frequency of micro practice usage. That is, is there an optimal combination of the different micro practices that men and women in our sample favored? Might this vary by context? Future work can then identify specific micro practices as potentially helpful in certain scenarios and less helpful in others. Further, future work could also identify the transferability (or lack thereof) of the specific micro practices we identified. Abstraction has advantages, but our more granular identification makes it easier for future work to either support or diverge from our findings.

5 | Conclusion

We set out to study how male and female leaders enacted leadership during a crisis. We found that crisis leadership creates a paradox for leaders: they experience limited agency in a role that is assumed to be agentic. Crisis leadership thus plays out via (a) processing the paradox and then (b) enacting leadership. Our theoretical framework reflects a dualism related to gender: we find similarity in the overarching pattern of findings, yet differences in the specific micro practices that men and women favored. Taken together, this paradox and dualism challenge the existing, idealized view of leadership in a crisis context and instead pave the way for future research from a more humanized, realistic view of crisis leadership.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Endnotes

¹The following are examples of incidents that did *not* include explicit or implicit mention of limited agency: "I received several positive comments from faculty for my team's ability to continue to complete their jobs and provide quick responses" (id = 32, Woman, Week 4) and "I attended and supported my Project Manager in his weekly 1:1 with my Project Director" (id = 8, Man, Week 2). These incidents did not allude to the leader experiencing a lack of control over their actions.

²We are thankful to an anonymous reviewer for pushing us to think about what specifically constitutes heroic leader behaviors. If we followed the logic of published crisis leadership reviews (Collins et al. 2022; James et al. 2011; Wu et al. 2021)—in which leaders are cast as shepherds or saints, projecting positive leadership, engaging in charismatic rhetoric, or transforming followers—we might expect to see confidence (e.g., “I know how to lead us through this uncertainty”), resilience and positive future visions (e.g., “We shall overcome this, win the war on Covid, we will emerge stronger than before”), and strength (e.g., “We are stronger than this”). These are the cognitive components of heroic leader behaviors. The emotional components could include powerful affects reflecting affiliation (e.g., hope, optimism) or dominance (e.g., anger, contempt, pride) exclusively and the absence of “weak” emotion families with appeasement motives (e.g., embarrassment, guilt, shame, regret) and supplication (e.g., sadness, distress, worry, and fear) (see Van Kleef and Côté 2022, for a review). In our work, we did not find much confidence, resilience, or expressions of positivity. The emotional experiences were also fairly nuanced and toward the supplication and affiliation categories.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section.