

**UNIVERSITY OF KWAZULU-NATAL**

**An examination of the role of leadership in fostering employee  
engagement during times of crises: A case study of the  
commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal**

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the degree of Master of Commerce**

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## ABSTRACT

The South African commercial property sector has experienced substantial hardship in the past few years. Significantly, the retail component of the sector is the second largest employer behind the government and is a significant contributor to the country's gross domestic product (GDP). The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, subsequent lockdown, and restriction of trade caused financial distress and heightened levels of anxiety and uncertainty in an already turbulent economy. The civil unrest in July 2021 where mass destruction and looting of retail outlets and warehouses added pressure to an industry still attempting to recover from the pandemic. This took place primarily in KwaZulu-Natal, which, despite being the third smallest province, is the second highest contributor to the country's GDP. Whilst embarking on repair and recovery efforts, the province experienced severe flooding in April 2022, which caused immense damage to infrastructure and buildings. Existing research advocates that employee engagement is a crucial factor of organisational success, with some scholars suggesting that workplace engagement is even more significant during times of crises for the survival of the business. Moreover, leadership is a critical driver of employee engagement. This lends itself to the overarching research question that this study seeks to address – the role of leadership in fostering employee engagement during times of crises in the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal. To this end, a qualitative single case study of eleven leaders comprising of executive, senior and middle managers in a property management company in the province was carried out. Key findings that emanated from the thematic analysis of the data suggest several roles that leaders play in fostering employee engagement during times of crisis. The cornerstone of employee engagement is communication, and the quality of the employer/employee relationship is the foundation for employee engagement. Future research could explore changes needed in areas like leasing policies and office space usage to support the viability of this important industry. The study was limited by only obtaining the perspectives of property management company leaders. Future research could compare leader and subordinate viewpoints for a more holistic understanding. The effects of crises on leaders themselves is another potential area of study, as the participants experienced pressure and inadequate upper-level support. Though leaders must demonstrate resilience in crises, they too need compassion. This study will be of value to leaders in terms of how to better engage with employees in times of crisis.

Keywords: Employee engagement, Leadership, Crises, Commercial property sector, Managing agent

## KEY TERMS

**Employee engagement:**

Employee engagement occurs when an employee emotionally commits to the success of an organisation, is aligned with the organisation, and feels valued and supported. It is an important contributor of organisational success (Saks & Gruman, 2014).

**Leadership:**

Leadership refers to the ability of an individual to influence and affect the motivation or competence of other individuals in a group to achieve common objectives and plays a pivotal role in fostering employee engagement (Grant, 2019).

**Crises:**

Crises are events or a series of unanticipated, disruptive events such as the Covid-19 pandemic, the civil unrest in July 2021, and the floods that ravaged KwaZulu Natal in April 2022. Crises require swift action to mitigate the threat to organisational survival (Saji, 2014).

**Commercial property sector:**

In the context of this study, the term commercial property sector refers to retail, office, and industrial properties that are rented to business owners for the purpose of making a profit. The key stakeholders are tenants, landlords and managing agents.

**Managing agent:**

A managing agent, in the context of this dissertation, refers to a property management company that serves as the “middleman” between landlords and tenants. The agent is entrusted to manage all aspects of the commercial property in terms of letting, collecting rental, building maintenance, operational and facility management.

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## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW**

### **1.1. Introduction**

The Covid-19 pandemic brought about unprecedented challenges from an organisational leadership perspective (Matli, 2020; Redda, 2021; Reinwald, Zimmermann & Kunz, 2021). The crisis caused major disruption and created several challenges for leaders (Collings, Nyberg, Wright & McMackin 2021; Reinwald, et al., 2021).

The momentum and degree at which the pandemic progressed put organisational leaders under significant pressure. The human impact of the crisis caused heightened levels of stress among employees. Well-established organisational practices and routines were displaced (Matli, 2020; Collings, et al., 2021).

The lockdown implemented in South Africa in March 2020 to curb the spread of the virus literally brought the economy to a standstill. Non-essential businesses were unable to operate. This resulted in job losses and business closures (Redda, 2021). There was great uncertainty for employers and employees alike (Collings, et al., 2021) with organisations having to restructure their operations and implement work-from-home efforts where possible. This had to take place with very little warning (Matli, 2020).

Prior to Covid-19, the South African economy was already compromised (Redda, 2021; Matli, 2020). In July 2021, the situation was exacerbated by the civil unrest when thousands descended on shopping centres and warehouses, looting, and destroying properties primarily in KwaZulu-Natal and to a lesser extent in Gauteng (Vhumbunu, 2021). In April 2022, heavy rains and flooding caused immense damage to infrastructure, businesses, and homes in KwaZulu-Natal (Mbhele, 2022).

These disruptive events can be termed as crises which require organisational leaders to respond in such a way as to mitigate the threat to the survival of the business as much as possible. The heightened state of anxiety brought about by these events impacts directly on employee engagement (Collings, et al., 2021; Reinwald, et al., 2021). Employee engagement, in turn impacts organisational performance (Saks & Gruman, 2014; Yin, 2018; Ahmed, Shahid, Thitivesa, Siraphatthada & Tawat, 2020; Collings, et al., 2021; Reinwald, et al., 2021; Kewalramani, 2022).

In light of the above, the study aimed to discover the role of leadership in fostering employee engagement in times of crises in the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal. The objectives were to:

- Determine how the crises affected the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal
- Examine how employee engagement was affected by the crises in the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal.
- Identify the role that leadership plays in fostering employee engagement during times of crises in the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal.

This chapter will proceed to discuss the South African commercial property sector and its contribution to the country's GDP. Thereafter, an analysis of the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal will be carried out. This will be followed by a discussion of the effect of the multiple crises on the commercial property sector.

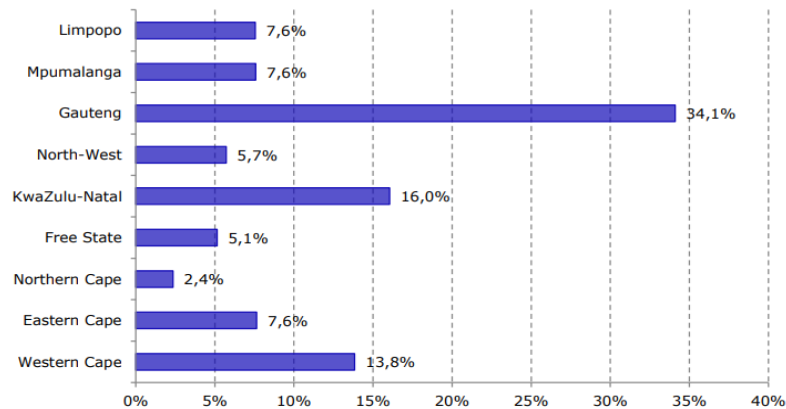
## **1.2. The South African commercial property sector**

The South African commercial property sector was one of the hardest hit industries in terms of the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic and the July 2021 unrest (Stats SA, 2021; Mbhele, 2022). The sector is a significant contributor to the country's gross domestic product (GDP) (Marzuki, 2018; Creamer Media, 2022). From an employment perspective, the retail industry is an important role player in South Africa, second only to the government which is the largest employer in the country (Teuteberg, 2021).

In 2017, assets under management in the commercial real estate market in the country were valued at \$76 billion. This represents 11% of the Middle East and Africa emerging market and 1% of the global emerging market (Marzuki, 2018). A 2021 Property Sector Charter Council study reports that the country's property market contributes R5.8 trillion to South Africa's GDP. Moreover, a report by the South African Reserve Bank (SARB) published in 2018 asserts that property makes up 76% of the nation's capital stock (Creamer Media, 2022). Research undertaken by Mordor Intelligence and Advisory projects that the commercial property sector will grow from \$8.68 billion to \$14.52 billion by 2028, representing a compound annual growth rate of 10.8% (Mordor Intelligence Research & Advisory, 2023). These figures demonstrate the significance of the market in the country and to the economy.

### 1.2.1. The KwaZulu-Natal commercial property sector

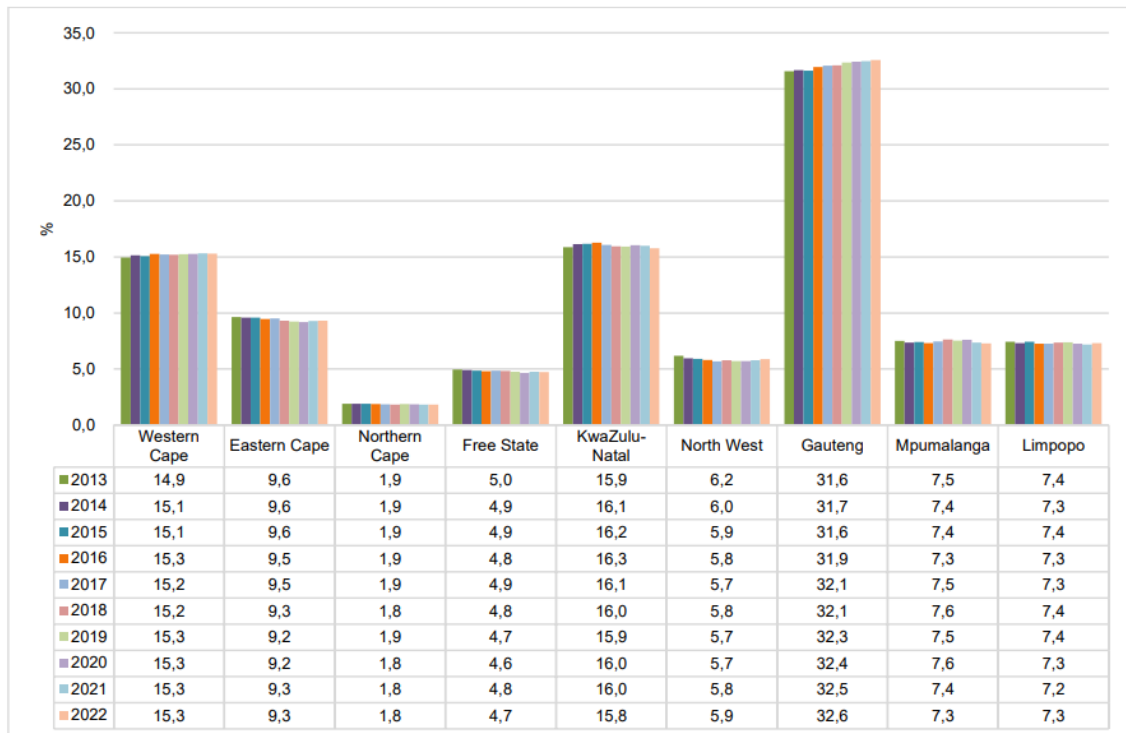
While KwaZulu-Natal is the third smallest province in terms of size, it is the second largest contributor to the country's GDP as depicted in Figure 1-1 below. The graph demonstrates the significance of KwaZulu-Natal to the South African economy (KwaZulu-Natal Province: Economic Development, Tourism and Environmental Affairs, 2023).



**Figure 1-1: Provincial contribution to South Africa's GDP**

(Source: KwaZulu-Natal Province: Economic Development, Tourism and Environmental Affairs, 2023, p. 4)

It is significant to note that KwaZulu-Natal is also the second largest contributor to the trade services industry and has retained this rank from 2013 to 2022. The trade services industry comprises the wholesale, retail, and motor trades as well as hotels and restaurants. While the figures depicted in Figure 1-2 below are not official statistics, they are aligned to the figures prior to the benchmarking exercise that has recently been concluded to enhance reporting on provincial GDP numbers (Stats SA, 2023). The graph below thus further illustrates KwaZulu Natal's significance to the economy and in particular to the commercial property sector.



**Figure 1-2: Trade services industry contribution by province**

(Source: Stats SA, 2023)

The commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal has seen significant growth with developments such as Durban's Point Waterfront, Gateway Theatre of Shopping, the development of the Umhlanga Ridge, the La Lucia Office Park, Suncoast Casino and Entertainment World, Sibaya Casino and Entertainment Kingdom, Liberty Midlands Mall and Dube TradePort. These significant commercial developments represent investments of R1 billion or more and serve to elevate property in the province. This is particularly significant in that the province previously lagged behind other provinces as an investment destination in as far as property investments is concerned (Trade & Investment KwaZulu-Natal, 2016).

The commercial developments mentioned above have spearheaded residential development, particularly in the Umhlanga, Mount Edgecombe and Ballito precincts whilst creating employment across numerous sectors (Trade & Investment KwaZulu-Natal, 2016).

KwaZulu-Natal houses two of the hemisphere's largest and busiest ports. These ports form part of the Industrial Development Zones which have contributed to the growth of the commercial property sector in the province (Trade & Investment KwaZulu-Natal, 2016).

Dube TradePort is the only facility on the African continent that includes an international airport, a dedicated cargo terminal, warehousing, offices, retail, hotels, and agriculture. This hub has

generated growth in industrial, retail and office space in surrounding areas. The facility is regarded as a significant attraction for both local and foreign investment and is considered one of the top ten investment opportunities in the country (Trade & Investment KwaZulu-Natal, 2016).

The retail sector in the province continues to grow with new developments such as Watercrest Mall in Hillcrest (Trade & Investment KwaZulu-Natal, 2016), Cornubia Mall - a R1.8 billion investment in the north (SA Commercial Prop News, 2016), Ballito Junction (SA Commercial Prop News, 2017), and Westown, a R30 million development that has been dubbed as a mini city between Durban and Johannesburg (BusinessTech, 2022). This, together with the discussion on the commercial property sector above demonstrates the significance of this industry to the economy and in particular to the province.

### **1.2.2. Crises affecting the commercial property sector**

The South African commercial property sector has been dealt blow after blow. The Covid-19 pandemic and consequent lockdown that restricted trade affected the retail industry and economy severely (Redda, 2021; Stats SA, 2021). In the midst of navigating this crisis, the civil unrest in KwaZulu-Natal and parts of Gauteng saw mass destruction and looting of commercial property (Vhumbunu, 2021). Then, in April 2022, KwaZulu-Natal experienced torrential rains and flooding, causing major damage to infrastructure and property (Mbhele, 2022).

Retailers play a vital role in the economy as they essentially bridge the gap between the manufacturer and the consumer (Redda, 2021; Hameli, 2018). According to Stats SA (2021), the pandemic resulted in the trade industry contracting by 5,5%. Moreover, while all trade sectors reported losses, retail businesses were impacted the most (Stats SA, 2021).

The effect of the pandemic on retail trade, is summarised in Table 1-1 below. Comparing sales of April 2019 to that of April 2020, when the hard lockdown was in full effect, reveals a decrease of 94% in textiles, clothing, and footwear sales. Sales of household furniture, appliances and equipment, and hardware, paint and glass fell by 89% and 88% respectively. Other retail sales fell by 90%. The decrease in retail revenue between March and April 2020 demonstrates the initial impact of the lockdown as clothing and footwear sales decreased by 92%, the household furniture and hardware categories fell by 89% each, while other retail revenue fell by 90% (Redda, 2021).

**Table 1-1: Initial impact assessment of Covid-19 on retailing**

	Jan-19	Feb-19	Mar-19	Apr-19	May-19	Jun-19	Jan-20	Feb-20	Mar-20	Apr-20	May-20	Jun-20	March-April 2020	YOY 19-20
<b>At constant prices</b>														
General dealers	30298	33089	34308	30743	33966	33085	30402	33311	38058	25815	32339	32772	-32%	-16%
Retailers of food, beverages and tobacco in specialised stores	5466	5435	5978	5666	5846	5597	5723	5493	6070	3454	4147	4981	-43%	-39%
Retailers in pharmaceutical and medical goods, cosmetics, toiletries	5688	5125	5366	5811	5479	5325	5592	5018	6166	5021	5134	5169	-19%	-14%
Retailers in textiles, clothing, footwear and leather goods	12438	11917	11468	13963	14139	13201	12697	12117	9757	782	14415	12192	-92%	-94%
Retailers in household furniture, appliances and equipment	3189	3137	3579	3366	3503	3550	3393	3293	3232	370	2450	4026	-89%	-89%
Retailers in hardware, paint and glass	5477	5906	5998	5739	6119	5760	5237	5880	5972	652	6305	6075	-89%	-89%
All other retailers	9563	9195	9365	9292	9204	9581	10025	10064	9023	920	4093	5147	-90%	-90%
<b>Total: Actual values</b>	72119	73804	76062	74580	78256	76099	73069	75176	78278	37014	68883	70362	-53%	-50%
<b>Total: Seasonally adjusted values</b>	78743	80667	78635	79235	80452	79716	80813	76197	81277	40105	69844	73798	-51%	-49%
<b>At current prices</b>														
General dealers	35861	39298	40980	36783	40780	39856	37277	41011	46970	31797	39883	40515	-32%	-14%
Retailers of food, beverages and tobacco in specialised stores	6816	6752	7484	7126	7370	7088	7399	7115	7907	4506	5392	6505	-43%	-37%
Retailers in pharmaceutical and medical goods, cosmetics, toiletries	6645	6021	6449	6919	6698	6528	6958	6303	7798	6338	6454	6478	-19%	-8%
Retailers in textiles, clothing, footwear and leather goods	13346	12808	12348	15056	15278	14280	13837	13229	10661	849	15574	13204	-92%	-94%
Retailers in household furniture, appliances and equipment	3104	3063	3469	3261	3389	3399	3227	3126	3067	350	2310	3785	-89%	-89%
Retailers in hardware, paint and glass	5891	6361	6470	6211	6650	6266	5811	6530	6634	721	6985	6729	-89%	-88%
All other retailers	9633	9496	9656	9585	9513	9916	10393	10460	9384	948	4238	5355	-90%	-90%
<b>Total: Actual values</b>	81496	83799	86886	84941	89678	87335	84902	87773	92421	45509	80836	82570	-51%	-46%
<b>Total: Seasonally adjusted values</b>	88890	91385	89316	90197	91820	91231	93955	88994	95107	49271	81721	86527	-48%	-45%

(Source: Redda, 2021, p. 33)

From a broader perspective the lockdown saw a major contraction on the South African economy during April, May and June 2020. GDP decreased between the first and second quarters of the year by slightly more than 16%, resulting in a negative annualised growth rate of -51%.

(Stats SA, 2020)

The looting in July 2021, which primarily affected KwaZulu-Natal, adversely affected the already beleaguered retail industry, which was still recovering from the effects of the Coronavirus pandemic (Mbhele, 2022). The looting and destruction of businesses and property saw 150 000 jobs at risk in KwaZulu-Natal, primarily due to business closures and delays in re-opening (Vhumbunu, 2021; Mundhree & Beharry-Ramraj, 2022).

There was widespread damage to 161 malls with more than 1,190 retail outlets damaged. In total a sum of 3,000 stores were looted and approximately 40,000 businesses and around 50,0000 informal traders were affected (Vhumbunu, 2021). Retail businesses were the most affected by the damage and destruction (Stats SA, 2021). Approximately 9% of shopping centres were severely damaged and the cost to rebuild these amounted to R14 billion (Mundhree & Beharry-Ramraj, 2022).

Table 1-2 below demonstrates the magnitude of the effect of the riots and looting on the economy, which essentially decreased GDP, increased expenses and negatively impacted economic growth (Mundhree & Beharry-Ramraj, 2022).

**Table 1-2: The effects of the rioting and looting on the economy**

Effects	Explanation
<b>Decreased GDP</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The riots and looting took place in only two provinces that is KZN and Gauteng which have a combined GDP contribution of 50%.</li> <li>• The overall cost impact on South Africa's national GDP stands at R50 billion while the loss stands at R40 billion, which is 0.7% of the GDP.</li> <li>• The riots and looting impacted South Africa's production, retail, transport and agricultural sectors which resulted in loss of business.</li> <li>• The unrest increased interest rates on long term borrowing.</li> </ul>
<b>Increase in expenses</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Between 8% and 9% of shopping malls were severely damaged and the cost of rebuilding was concluded at R14 billion.</li> <li>• The affects of the unrest required the government to hand out food parcels to affected communities.</li> <li>• Reinstatement of the SRD R350 grant for those unemployed.</li> </ul>
<b>Decreased economic growth</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The unrest caused the Rand to depreciate by 2.4% which results in the economy taking longer to recover from the impact of the unrest.</li> <li>• The impact of the unrest on economic growth is expected to pass into 2022.</li> <li>• The unemployment rate plummeted after the events of the unrest; an estimate of 150 000 jobs were at risk within the KZN region alone.</li> <li>• The unrest negatively impacted foreign perception and direct investment.</li> <li>• The unrest decreased confidence levels of consumers and businesses affecting the spending and investment levels within the country.</li> <li>• The unrest interrupted the rollout of the Covid-19 vaccine which delayed the re-opening of the economy.</li> </ul>

(Source: Mundhree & Beharry-Ramraj, 2022, p. 20075)

The floods of April 2022 exacerbated the situation, causing further disruption. Both tenants and landlords suffered significant financial loss as a result of these catastrophic events (SA Commerical Prop News, 2022).

### 1.2.3. Crises, employee engagement and leadership

Covid-19, the looting, and flooding are complex, disruptive, unexpected events that generated concerns about health, job security and organisational sustainability. Saji (2014) argues that it is during times of crisis that the services of engaged employees are paramount for business survival.

Thus, in times of crises, one of the key roles of leaders includes honest communication about their approach in dealing with these events. This is particularly significant as employees play a strategic role in assisting the enterprise to build resilience and mitigate negativity within the organisation itself (Ahmed, et al., 2020; Collings, et al., 2021). Kewalramani (2022) avers that this generates trust in the leadership, which enhances employee engagement but Tao, Lee, Sun,

Li and He (2022) argue that in times of crises, employee engagement is affected by fear and uncertainty surrounding possible retrenchments, pay cuts and reduction of benefits. This is supported by Reinwald, et al. (2021) who state that powerful external events affect the work environment and thus affect employee work engagement. This lends itself to the overarching research objective of ascertaining the role that leaders have in fostering employee engagement in times of crisis, given that engagement is the principal enabler of the successful implementation of any business strategy (Wellins, Bernthal & Phelps, 2005; Saji, 2014; Decuypere & Schaufeli, 2020).

While the repercussions and extent of the crises described above are plentiful, this study sought to assess these crises in the realm of the commercial property industry, with a focus on the shopping centre arena. The industry was already under strain due to the restriction of trade during various levels of lockdown during the Covid-19 pandemic (Redda, 2021; Mbhele, 2022).

### **1.3. Problem statement**

The relationship between employee engagement and organisational performance has received the attention of several scholars and business leaders. In a complex and volatile environment, organisations seek to develop a competitive advantage that will not only give them an edge over rival firms but will also maintain the sustainability of the business. To this end, the role of employees, who are responsible for delivering organisational objectives has emerged as a critical driver of competitive advantage (Amir, 2014; Bhasin, 2014; Kumar & Mishra, 2014; Kumar & Pansari, 2015; Massingham, 2020).

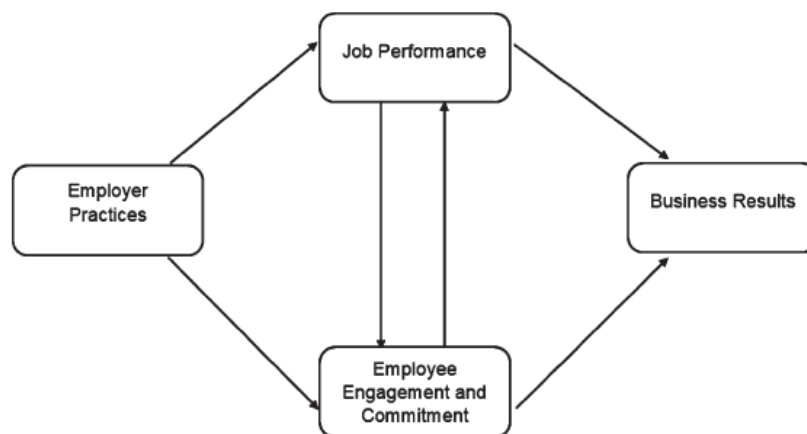
Existing research proposes that leadership plays a vital role as a driver of employee engagement (Ahmed, et al., 2020; Chanana & Sangeeta, 2021; Kewalramani, 2022). This is significant given the relationship between employee engagement and organisational performance (Saks & Gruman, 2014; Ahmed, et al., 2020; Chanana & Sangeeta, 2021; Kewalramani, 2022; Tao, et al., 2022), which will be explored further in Chapter Two.

While existing scholarship demonstrates the interrelationship between leadership, employee engagement and organisational performance, the role of leadership in fostering employee engagement during times of crisis appears to be scant. This is particularly significant as crises can threaten the organisation's survival (Saji, 2014; Reinwald, et al., 2021; Balasubramanian & Fernandes, 2022).

Given the significance of the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal, as detailed in the preceding section, this study adopted a case study approach to uncover the role that leadership plays in fostering employee engagement, which in itself is an important determinant of organisational success, during times of crisis. This study thus aims to close the research gap by examining the role of leadership on employee engagement during times of crises in the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal.

#### 1.4. Motivation and purpose of the study

As highlighted previously, employee engagement has an important role to play in achieving organisational objectives. Moreover, leadership drives employee engagement. Ultimately, leadership sets the direction and governs the employer-employee relationship. As shown in Figure 1-3 below, leadership (through employer practices) affects engagement and job performance, all of which affect organisational performance (Ahmed, et al., 2020).



**Figure 1-3: Employer practices influence organisational performance**  
(Source: Ahmed et al., 2020, p. 590)

As detailed in the background to this study, the commercial property sector is a significant contributor to the economy (Marzuki, 2018; Creamer Media, 2022). Property experts predict that the effects of Covid-19 and the looting on the industry are still to be fully determined. This lends itself to concerns about job security for those employed in the sector including tenants, landlords and managing agents of commercial buildings (Mahlaka, 2021; Reinwald, et al., 2021).

This study thus sought to uncover the role of leadership in fostering employee engagement in the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal during times of crisis.

### **1.5. Focus of the study**

There are numerous role players in the commercial property sector. These include landlords, managing agents, and a wide range of tenants from retail giants to smaller owner-run businesses, all of which have a significant role to play in terms of job creation and bridging the gap between manufacturer and consumer, contributing to the GDP of the country (Hameli, 2018).

The scope and scale of this sector are therefore very broad. This research thus focuses on obtaining the perspective of leaders from a property management company who are directly involved in managing commercial properties (being retail, office and industrial properties) in KwaZulu-Natal, which has already been demonstrated as a key contributor to the country's GDP in the property and retail sectors (Marzuki, 2018; Creamer Media, 2022; KwaZulu-Natal Province: Economic Development, Tourism and Environmental Affairs, 2023). Managing agents are essentially the bridge between landlord and tenant and thus, offer a holistic perspective of the industry.

### **1.6. Significance of the study**

The impact of employee engagement on organisational outcomes has gained recognition, causing leaders to seek additional strategies to enhance and improve engagement (Grant, 2019). This is well and good in the normal course of business but in times of crises, particularly those on the scale of the Coronavirus pandemic and the civil unrest, the dynamics change and employees are faced with conflicting priorities, anxiety and fear (Saji, 2014; Lazim, Salim and Wahab, 2020; Balasubramanian & Fernandes, 2022).

Leaders in the property management company under research had to navigate through uncharted territory to lead their teams through these crises whilst trying to ensure organisational survival. This study will hopefully contribute to a better understanding as to the role of leadership in fostering employee engagement in the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal in times of crisis. The choice of this sector having been well established in the preceding sections of this dissertation. Furthermore, it is hoped that this study will provide guidance to leaders in general in terms of their role in fostering employee engagement during difficult circumstances.

### **1.7. Aims and objectives of the research**

This study aimed to discover the role of leadership in fostering employee engagement in times of crises in the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal. To this end, the following objectives were established:

- To determine how the crises affected the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal.
- To examine how employee engagement was affected by the crises in the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal.
- To identify the role that leadership plays in fostering employee engagement during times of crises in the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal.

### **1.8. Research questions**

The study sought to answer the following questions:

- How did the crises affect the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal?
- How was employee engagement affected by the crises in the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal?
- What role did leadership play in fostering employee engagement during times of crises in the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal?

### **1.9. Research methodology**

This study adopted a qualitative approach, which was deemed the most suitable method to gain an in-depth understanding of what is essentially a social problem. Purposive sampling was used to select the most experienced and resource rich leaders within the property management company under research, who were regarded as being best placed to provide the data required for the study.

A gatekeeper's letter was obtained, permitting the study to take place at the organisation and ethical clearance for the research was sought from the University of KwaZulu-Natal. This is attached to this dissertation as Annexure C. Once this was in hand, the participants were invited to participate in the study. An informed consent form (see Annexure A) was received from all those willing to be interviewed. Data was collected from semi-structured interviews (see Annexure B) which took place via Microsoft Teams in August 2023. After transcribing the interviews, content analysis was used to uncover the themes emanating from the data. These themes are explored in Chapter Four of this dissertation.

## **1.10. Structure of the dissertation**

This chapter provides an introduction and overview of the study, contextualising the research in the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal, as an important contributor to the GDP. The importance of leadership as a driver of employee engagement is highlighted. The significance of employee engagement in terms of its influence on organisational success is introduced and an overview of the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic, the rioting and looting and flooding on the commercial property sector is outlined. The rationale for the research, focus and significance of the study is also provided, and the research objectives and questions are stipulated. An overview of the research methodology adopted for the study is offered in this chapter as well.

Chapter Two provides the theoretical foundation for the study. The chapter then proceeds to provide an analysis of existing scholarship around leadership and employee engagement. Leadership in times of crisis is also explored.

The third chapter details the research methodology used in the study. The research design, sampling, data collection and data analysis methods are explained in relation to the research paradigm of interpretivism. This was a qualitative study that used semi-structured interviews with leaders of a property management company in KwaZulu-Natal to obtain their perceptions about the role of leadership in fostering employee engagement during times of crises.

Chapter Four describes the findings from the semi-structured interviews which took place with 11 leaders from a property management company in KwaZulu-Natal. The data from these interviews was analysed and presented as various themes that emerged from the experiences and perceptions of the participants about the impact of the multiple crises on the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal, the effect of these crises on employee engagement and the leadership role in fostering engagement during these difficult and challenging circumstances. The findings corroborate that the crises had a devastating impact on the sector and highlight leadership challenges faced in this regard. In addition, the importance of providing emotional and mental support to their teams was highlighted together with the role of communication as a critical tool for employee engagement.

Chapter Five contains a discussion of the findings in relation to existing literature and in terms of the research questions, which were developed around the central aim and purpose of this study which was to determine the role of leadership in fostering employee engagement in the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal during times of crisis.

The last chapter sets out the recommendations and conclusion of the study. This chapter seeks to confirm that the research objectives have been met. In addition, limitations of the study and suggestions for future research are provided.

### **1.11. Summary**

This chapter provided the context and the background to the study, describing the problem statement, and the motivation and purpose of this research. It also outlined the significance of the study and provided an overview of the research methodology used. The research objectives and questions were detailed and an overview of the structure of the dissertation was provided.

The next chapter centres around a review of existing scholarship relevant to this study including leadership as a driver of employee engagement and leadership in times of crisis.

## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1. Introduction**

The first chapter set out the introduction and background to the study, the problem statement, and the motivation, and purpose of the study. In addition, the focus and the significance of the study, the research objectives, questions, and outline of the research methodology were provided.

This chapter starts off by providing the theoretical framework that underpins the study. Thereafter, an analysis of existing scholarship surrounding the key concepts of leadership and employee engagement during times of crises is uncovered. Essentially, a literature review seeks to disclose existing information regarding the research topic to firstly, understand the current perception about the topic and secondly, to find relevant studies that could enhance the research being undertaken. A literature review thus also serves to identify any potential gaps in the research area (du Plooy-Cilliers, Davis & Bezuidenhout, 2014).

### **2.2. Theoretical framework**

The theoretical framework serves as the basis from which all knowledge is developed for a research study. It serves to frame the rationale for the study, the problem statement, the purpose, the significance, and the research questions (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). This study is underpinned by two theories that form the foundation for the research, namely the social exchange theory and employee engagement theory, which are outlined below.

#### **2.2.1 Social exchange theory**

Social exchange theory was initially used to portray attitudes and behaviours in social interactions between people. In time, the concept was extended to include the relationship between an organisation and its members (Yin, 2018). This is evidenced in the reciprocal relationship that exists in the workplace between employer and employee (Cherry, 2022).

The social exchange theory purports that interactions between people (management and staff) are established through upholding a balance between giving and receiving. An organisation that offers employees rewards and respect engenders trust in these personnel, which in turn motivates employees to work hard, improving performance (Yin, 2018; Grant, 2019). Conversely, should employees feel that their efforts are not being reciprocated, their performance could be negatively

impacted, which, by implication, affects organisational performance (Ahmed, et al., 2020; Cherry, 2022).

### **2.2.2 Employee engagement theory**

Employee engagement theory, founded by William Kahn, advocates that personal engagement is where organisational members connect their selves to their work roles. Work (employee) engagement is where employees are physically, cognitively, and emotionally invested in the fulfilment of their roles. This infers that work engagement is a motivational notion (Decuyper & Schaufeli, 2020). Kahn avers that the level of a person's engagement is dependent on their experience of psychological meaningfulness, psychological safety, and psychological availability. The greater the experience of these psychological measures, the greater the level of engagement by the employee (Saks & Gruman, 2014).

Psychological meaningfulness can be likened to the value that employees perceive as being received in return for their efforts in their roles. Meaningfulness is derived from a sense of purpose, usefulness, value, and appreciation (Saks & Gruman, 2014). Saji (2014) offers that the willingness of the employee to exert more effort than what is required is the most significant component of employee engagement. It can thus be argued that the more meaningful the employee perceives their role, the more likely they are to offer more than the minimum job or task requirements. Moreover, in organisations where employees experience positive psychological meaningfulness, there is enthusiasm for work and organisational pride (Saji, 2014).

Psychological safety encompasses a workplace environment that allows employees to express their true selves without worrying about negative repercussions from a personal or career perspective. This element of employee engagement is derived from good leader interaction and empowerment through a culture of trust and supportive managerial behaviour (Saji, 2014; Saks & Gruman, 2014).

Psychological availability is the belief that the employee has the physical, emotional, and psychological capacity to perform a specific function or role. (Saji, 2014; Saks & Gruman, 2014). In other words, psychological availability reflects how mentally present and engaged employees are at work. Employees with high psychological availability possess greater inner resources, are more creative and display greater creativity, and are more resolute (Li & Zhang, 2023).

Ahmed et al. (2020) offers that employee engagement relates to the mental, emotional, and behavioural state of the employee in relation to organisational goals. Moreover, employee engagement is an attribute of the relationship between an organisation and its members and between employees and their work (Ahmed, et al., 2020). Grant (2019) views this relationship as a personal one, in which employees view their employers positively. Saks and Gruman (2014) add that employee engagement affects organisational outcomes such as customer satisfaction, productivity, and profitability. This is corroborated by Grant (2019), who states that poor engagement impacts negatively on productivity and consequently on organisational success.

Rahmadani, Schaufeli, Stouten, Zhang, and Zulkarnain (2020) explain employee engagement as a positive, gratifying, work-related state of mind that is underpinned with the qualities of vigour, dedication, and absorption. The authors advocate that employees with high levels of work engagement are innovative and creative. This is supported by Decuyper and Schaufeli (2020) who add, in corroboration with Saji (2014), that engaged employees depict extra-role behaviour. Moreover, these authors confirm the views of Ahmed (2020) and Grant (2019) that work engagement is positively linked to organisational performance, with Decuyper and Schaufeli (2020) maintaining a correlation between employee well-being and productivity, stating that work engagement may well be a critical driver of business success.

An alternate view of employee engagement is that it is regarded as the opposite of burnout. This implies that engagement is a positive condition influencing the health and well-being of employees (Saks & Gruman, 2014). Grant (2019) adds that employee engagement relates to the employee's positive attitude toward employers. Ahmed et al. (2020) confirms the importance of employee engagement stating that the efficiency and effectiveness of an enterprise is reliant on the collaborative efforts of all employees. Decuyper and Schaufeli (2020) expand further that work engagement relates to employee health and turnover intentions. Moreover, engagement is associated with improved service and engenders customer loyalty.

The significance of employee engagement is evident in the paradigm shift from the twentieth century view that production equipment is the most valuable asset within an entity. Human capital is now regarded as the asset that can deliver a distinctive competitive advantage in the modern, technological era (Amir, 2014; Bhasin, 2014; Kumar & Mishra, 2014; Kumar & Pansari, 2015; Massingham, 2020). This is supported by Lazim et al. (2020) who maintain that human resources play a central role in determining the sustainability and growth of the organization.

### **2.2.3 The relationship between employee engagement and social exchange theories**

The overview of these two theories provided above, suggest a relationship between the social exchange theory and the employee engagement theory (Yin, 2018; Ahmed, et al., 2020). This is supported in the 2021 Deloitte Global Human Capital Special Trends Report that confirms the evolution of business enterprises to social enterprises, which indicates the relationship that businesses have with their workers (Volini, Schwartz, Eaton, Hauptmann, Mallon, Poynton, Scobie-Williams & van Durme, 2021).

This is further corroborated by Reinwald et al. (2021), whose research suggests that where employees do not feel supported, their engagement will in all probability be negatively impacted. This clearly supports that the employer / employee relationship is reciprocal with levels of engagement being affected by the leaders. Saks and Gruman (2014) advocate that leadership has a significant role to play in engagement. This is supported by Grant (2019), who contests that a positive relationship between leaders and employees in an organisation is the foundation for employee engagement. Popli and Rizvi (2016) allude to the relational aspect between leader-follower affiliations, advocating that leadership style is key for promoting employee engagement.

The significance of these two theories in the context of the research study is firstly that this study highlights the importance of employee engagement and its pivotal role in organisational success. This lends itself to the role of leadership, who need to implement strategies to foster employee engagement in order to steer their organisations to achieve objectives and succeed (Wellins, et al., 2005; Saji, 2014; Grant, 2019; Ahmed, et al., 2020). Secondly, the social exchange theory demonstrates that there is a relationship between leaders and their subordinates. This can either foster engagement or adversely affect it (Popli & Rizvi, 2016; Cherry, 2022). This study seeks to examine the role of leadership in fostering employee engagement, which as highlighted above, is a key determinant of organisational success, in the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal, with the commercial property sector being a major contributor to national GDP, and KwaZulu-Natal the second largest contributor to national GDP, during times of crises.

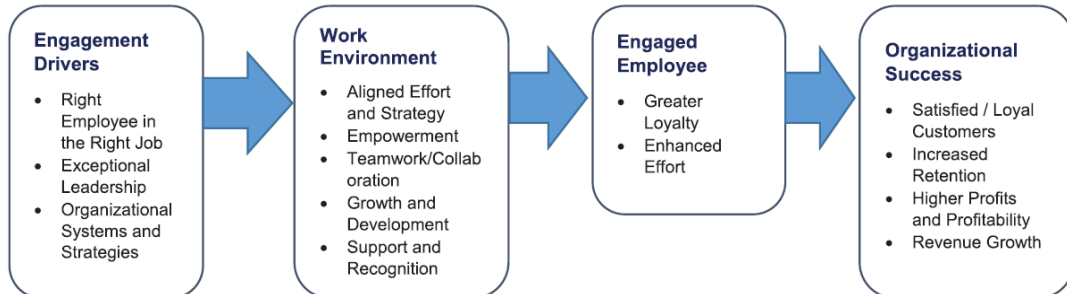
### **2.3. Review of previous literature**

An analysis of existing scholarship took place to uncover what has already been said about leadership as a key driver of employee engagement. This is detailed in section 2.3.1 below.

### 2.3.1 Leadership as a driver of employee engagement

Effective leadership is a key driver in motivating employees and engenders positive performance and growth in the organisation (Ahmed, et al., 2020). The concept of engaging leadership asserts that engaging leaders act in such a way that they satisfy the basic work-related needs of those in their charge. Self-determination theory (SDT) offers that employees are likely to demonstrate enthusiasm, effort, and persistence to the degree that their needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness are met. In other words, when the employee's basic needs are satisfied, the levels of engagement in terms of vigour, dedication, and absorption increase. Decuyper and Schaufeli (2020) add that positive leadership styles have proven to enhance employee engagement. This demonstrates the interrelationship between leadership and employee engagement (Decuyper & Schaufeli, 2020; Rahmadani, et al., 2020).

High employee satisfaction with the organisational leadership results in high morale, evidencing the role of leaders in fostering employee engagement for organisational success. This is depicted in Figure 2-1 below, which represents the value proposition for employee engagement developed by international consulting firm, Development Dimensions International (Ahmed, et al., 2020).



**Figure 2-1: Organisational success stems from employee engagement**

(Source: Ahmed et al., 2020, p. 591)

The model centres around four sequential components. The engagement drivers in the first block centre around leadership, who recruit, motivate, and influence their followers and set organisational strategy (Wellins, et al., 2005; Ahmed, et al., 2020).

Successfully appointing the right employee in the right job is the initial step in enhancing employee engagement. This together with outstanding leadership that includes sound systems and strategies leads to an engaged work environment (as shown in the second block). Leadership is regarded as being a major factor that affects employee perceptions in and about the workplace and towards employee engagement. The engagement drivers (depicted in the first block) stem

from leadership. These drivers work together to create an engaging work environment as depicted in the second block (Wellins, et al., 2005; Ahmed, et al., 2020; Popli & Rizvi, 2016). An engaged work environment suggests an environment that is psychologically safe and offers psychological meaningfulness due to a perceived sense of purpose and usefulness as highlighted in Kahn's definition of employee engagement (Saks & Gruman, 2014). Saji (2014) adds that the synergy between personal and organisational objectives and the willingness of the employee to offer more than what is required stems from an engaged work environment. In addition, the engaged employee (as depicted in the third block) is more loyal and committed to achieving organisational objectives (Wellins, et al., 2005; Saji, 2014; Ahmed, et al., 2020).

The consequence of the first three elements in the model result in organisational success as indicated in the fourth block in Figure 2-1 above. Ultimately, the key outcome of employee engagement is that of competitive advantage, positively impacting on customer retention, facilitating revenue growth, and increasing profits (Wellins, et al., 2005; Grant, 2019; Ahmed, et al., 2020). As the adage goes, a happy employee is a productive employee.

Notably, the starting and central point in achieving organisational success is leadership. As stated by Wellins et al. (2005) engagement does not materialise without the efforts of leaders who need to recruit and retain the right staff and implement strong systems and strategies that support the organisation's objectives. Decuyper and Schaufeli (2020) add that leaders are able to influence employee engagement not only in adapting work conditions, but also through inspiring and strengthening their employees. Moreover, both Decuyper and Schaufeli (2020) and Lazim et al. (2020) aver that leadership styles affect employee engagement. Grant (2019) concurs that employee engagement is directly affected by leadership styles. The contemporary workplace acknowledges the significance of employee engagement and are holding leaders accountable for driving employee engagement (Popli & Rizvi, 2016). It is evident therefore, that the existing scholarship confirms that leadership has a significant role to play in employee engagement.

In addition, given the effect and influence of leadership on employee engagement, Grant (2019), in his research about leadership and engagement, suggests several strategies that leaders can employ to foster engagement in the workplace. This is significant because of the impact that employee engagement has on organisational performance (Grant, 2019; Ahmed, et al., 2020).

The first strategy is that leaders should develop a leader–employee relationship in the working environment, which corroborates the relationship between the social exchange and employee engagement theories (Saks & Gruman, 2014; Grant, 2019; Reinwald, et al., 2021; Volini, et al.,

2021). This relationship should centre around effective communication and feedback, which is the second strategy suggested by Grant (2019). This advocates the importance of what Kahn terms psychological safety, as a key element in ensuring employee engagement (Saks & Gruman, 2014; Grant, 2019; Ahmed, et al., 2020).

The third strategy that Grant (2019) offers to enhance engagement is that organisational leaders should provide compensation, awards, benefits, and incentives. These external rewards contribute to psychological meaningfulness in that employees are valued, appreciated, and have a sense of purpose. (Saks & Gruman, 2014; Grant, 2019; Ahmed, et al., 2020).

The final strategy for improved employee engagement is that leaders should inculcate a learning environment that offers training and development (Grant, 2019). The learning organisation is underpinned by knowledge management, which offers a robust tool for survival and growth for all organisations given the technological, highly competitive environment of today's business world (Umunadi, 2014; Massingham, 2020).

Ultimately, Grant's (2019) research confirms that leaders play a significant role in fostering employee engagement. This is supported by Kewalramani (2022) and Kumar and Pansani (2015), who suggest that measuring employee engagement is important for organisations to understand the current status in order to develop strategies to enhance workforce engagement for organisational success.

In addition, as evidenced above, the existing body of knowledge offers numerous theories confirming that leadership affects employee engagement and suggests various strategies to improve employee engagement for competitive advantage (Wellins, et al., 2005; Saji, 2014; Saks & Gruman, 2014; Grant, 2019; Ahmed, et al., 2020). These strategies suggest that developing employee engagement is a process that leaders need to foster over time.

The importance of leadership as a driver of employee engagement serves as a foundational element of this study. To this end, leaders in the property management company under research were asked to explain how employee engagement was affected by the crises and what role they played in fostering employee engagement in these times. From the scholarship reviewed above, however, there appears to be limited research regarding the role of leaders in fostering employee engagement in times of crises, which will be explored below.

### 2.3.2 Leadership in times of crisis

Organisations operate in conditions that can be described as volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) (Daft, 2018; Moldoveanu & Narayandas, 2019). The increase in globalization and the advances in technology over the last few decades has resulted in an increasingly interdependent and interconnected world, adding to this complexity and uncertainty (Aregbeshola, Luiz, Ojah, Oosthuizen, Palmer & Venter, 2011; Yue, 2021; EAPA-SA, 2022). The workplace has and will continue to evolve with further advancements in technology and shifts in employee expectations (Millar, Groth & Mahan, 2018; EAPA-SA, 2022).

Leaders need to manage this VUCA environment not only on a personal level but also in terms of directing and navigating their organisations through the transition and challenges brought about by rapidly changing circumstances (Bywater & Lewis, 2019). This suggests that leaders need to be agile and flexible in navigating these uncertainties (de Smet, Lurie & St. George, 2018), by implementing strategies and mitigating risks. Rapid changes in the business environment exert pressure on organisations to respond effectively and in a timely manner. This requires innovative thinking by organisational role players (Rahmadani, et al., 2020).

The Coronavirus pandemic created unprecedented, significant, and immediate changes on a societal level and in the workplace. The crisis disrupted the business terrain and forced organisations into a new way of working, thinking, leading, and managing (Emmett, Komm, Moritz, Schultz & Friederike, 2021; Komm, et al., 2021; Yue, 2021; EAPA-SA, 2022).

Significantly, Covid-19 was unprecedented in scale and time, which left leaders, regardless of the amount of experience or training they had, unprepared. Despite this, organisations relied on their leaders to navigate the businesses through the crisis. This solidifies the importance of strong leadership during crises (Balasubramanian & Fernandes, 2022).

When there are major catastrophic events or crises - such as the Coronavirus pandemic, looting and flooding mentioned previously, the focus shifts to implementing a change necessary to protect the organisation and all its stakeholders. Crises are sudden, unexpected events that change the dynamics. These unforeseen events pose a threat to the organisation and demand immediate action to mitigate negative outcomes and ensure sustainability in the long-term (Saji, 2014; de Smet, et al., 2018; Balasubramanian & Fernandes, 2022). Essentially, in a crisis situation, the old system cannot be maintained, and change is needed. During the Covid-19 pandemic leaders had

a responsibility to keep their staff safe, but they also had to adopt strategies to ensure organisational survival in the long-term (Saji, 2014; Balasubramanian & Fernandes, 2022).

In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, this meant making allowance for work from home constraints such as having to look after children while working. This essentially translates to an adaptation of working conditions, which is one of the ways in which leaders influence employee engagement (Decuyper & Schaufeli, 2020).

In the normal course of events, leaders should set clear directions and expectations from their team and ensure that their employees have sufficient resources to carry out their tasks (Ahmed, et al., 2020; Chanana & Sangeeta, 2021). During the sudden shift to work from home because of the pandemic, leaders had to implement changes, manage resources, and set direction with very little time to prepare (Matli, 2020; Collings, et al., 2021).

Lazim et al. (2020) suggest that leaders play an important role in crucial times like these to bolster morale and improve motivation as these are easily swayed during crises. This is supported by Tao et al. (2022) who contend that employee engagement actually wanes during uncertain times. During difficult times, leaders thus have a responsibility to institute policies and ways of working that foster employee engagement (Ahmed, et al., 2020). This enhances motivation and commitment (Saks & Gruman, 2014; Kewalramani, 2022). Notwithstanding the fundamental role of leadership in times of crisis, Balasubramanian and Fernandes (2022) advocate that research in this field remains limited and disjointed. In asking the leaders in the company under research how they fostered employee engagement during the multiple crises, it is envisaged that a better understanding of the role of leadership in fostering employee engagement in turbulent times will emerge.

### **2.3.3 Employee engagement**

As highlighted in the section about employee engagement theory, work engagement has a critical role to play in organisational success (Saji, 2014; Grant, 2019; Ahmed, et al., 2020; Decuyper & Schaufeli, 2020).

Organisations where employees are physically, cognitively, and emotionally invested in their work prove to be the most productive (Grant, 2019). Put differently, employee engagement is positively associated with organisational performance, impacting on customer satisfaction, productivity, and profitability (Saks & Gruman, 2014; Ahmed, et al., 2020; Chanana & Sangeeta,

2021). This is further corroborated by Lazim et al. (2020), who advocate that employee morale is a key contributor to organisational success. This is evident in existing research that supports the correlation between a decline in global productivity and disengaged employees. This phenomenon has caused organisational leaders to realise the role that employee engagement has on productivity levels and therefore on organisational performance (Saks & Gruman, 2014; Grant, 2019; Ahmed, et al., 2020; Chanana & Sangeeta, 2021).

Employees, whose personal needs are respected are more likely to feel an affinity to the organisation and therefore are prepared to put in more effort (Kewalramani, 2022), which is a key element of employee engagement according to Saji (2014).

At the time of crises, however, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, the looting and floods, employees are distracted from investing themselves fully into their jobs (Reinwald, et al., 2021). Their focus and attention are divided between work responsibilities, family responsibilities, and managing their own fears around ill health and safety. Research undertaken by Lazim et al. (2020) confirms that the Covid-19 pandemic negatively affected employee morale. Feelings of anxiety, insecurity and demotivation were experienced. This presents a challenge for leaders and demonstrates the need to understand the role of leadership in fostering employee engagement during times of crises.

The Coronavirus pandemic prompted workers to reflect on their purpose and that of their jobs, with employees resigning if these values were not aligned (BusinessTech, 2022; Sikder & Hess, 2022). This phenomenon, termed “The Great Resignation”, confirms that employee engagement is influenced by the level of psychological meaningfulness found in the workplace (Saks & Gruman, 2014; Grant, 2019; Ahmed, et al., 2020).

Even before the onset of the pandemic and the subsequent “Great Resignation”, highlighted above, a study undertaken by Gallup in 2014 revealed that around 70% of the American workforce had low levels of engagement. This translated to a loss of \$300 billion in productivity on a nationwide scale. A 2015 study yielded similar results, with only 32% of employees in America feeling engaged in the workplace (Grant, 2019). A 2022 survey of American employees pegs employee engagement at 31%. Globally, employee engagement averages only 23%. While this represents a positive trend from pandemic levels, the opportunities for leaders to develop strategies to improve engagement is evident (Grant, 2019; Gallup Incorporated, 2023). Post pandemic, world stress levels remain at the highest level ever recorded (Gallup Incorporated, 2023).

Disengagement causes high levels of absenteeism, high employee turnover and increased employee conflict. This in turn negatively impacts organisational effectiveness (Grant, 2019; Gallup Incorporated, 2023) and confirms that there is a need for additional research on the role of leadership in fostering employee engagement necessary for organisational success.

Another trend that emerged when employees found a mismatch between their purpose and that of their work is “quiet quitting”. As opposed to resigning from their jobs, quiet quitters continue to carry out their main duties but are reluctant to go the extra mile. As such, they are unwilling to work late, start early or attend non-compulsory meetings (Klotz & Bolino, 2022). Considering Saji’s (2014) argument that the willingness of the employee to exert more effort than what is required is the most significant component of employee engagement, quiet quitting has a negative effect on organisational success (Saks & Gruman, 2014; Yin, 2018; Grant, 2019; Ahmed, et al., 2020; O’Rourke, 2021; Kewalramani, 2022). In their State of the Global Workplace report, Gallup Incorporated (2023) reveals that 59% of the global workforce are quiet quitting – in other words, they are disengaged, which adversely affects organisational performance.

The Sub-Saharan region is tracking at 20% of employees thriving at work, 3% below the global average. South Africa’s employee engagement figures are higher than the regional and global averages at 26% (Gallup Incorporated, 2023).

It is evident that employee engagement is a crucial factor in organisational success. Survey after survey by renowned firm Gallup Incorporated highlight the need for leaders to develop strategies that will improve employee engagement. Disengaged employees are “low-hanging fruit for productivity gains”, (Gallup Incorporated, 2023, p. 10), ripe for leaders to inspire and motivate them.

Employee engagement has become a central focal point for organisations who seek to adopt this as part of the organisational culture for competitive advantage. Kumar and Pansari (2015) confirm this by stating that while customer driven strategies remain important, there has been growing recognition of the impact of employees on organisational performance.

Gallup’s 10<sup>th</sup> meta-analysis of employee engagement and team performance revealed that highly engaged employees produce fewer negative outcomes, generate greater positive results and greater success for the firm while the opposite was true in those teams with low engagement. The impact of highly engaged teams on these measures is depicted in Figure 2-2 below. These results stem from analysing responses from 54 industries including manufacturing, construction, retail,

services, transportation, and finance in 96 countries, incorporating 276 organisations across 112,312 business units and over 2,7 million employees. Gallup's research highlights that leaders have a role to play in fostering employee engagement for improved outcomes in business performance and employee wellbeing.



**Figure 2-2 The effect of highly engaged teams**  
(Source: Gallup Incorporated, 2020, p. 3)

The significance of employee engagement has been well demonstrated in the literature review above. The model developed by Development Dimensions International depicted in Figure 2-1 demonstrates that organisational success stems from employee engagement (Wellins, et al., 2005; Ahmed, et al., 2020).

Saji's (2014) research, however, uncovers a central point – engaged employees are not only important for organisational success but are essential during times of crisis. Saji (2014) states that efficient (engaged) staff are instrumental to organisational survival during times of crises. This is supported by another survey undertaken by Gallup Incorporated (2020), which determines that employee engagement is even more important during difficult economic times and when there are major disruptive events (Gallup Incorporated, 2020).

Studies show that an organisational culture that yields strong levels of engagement results in a more resilient firm, better equipped to deal with the challenges of disruption (Gallup Incorporated, 2020; Gallup Incorporated, 2023). Popli and Rizvi (2016) add that engaged employees demonstrate behaviours that could benefit the organisation. These include the discretionary effort referred to by Saji (2014), speaking favourably of the company, collaboration, knowledge-sharing and employing pro-active, creative problem-solving techniques, all of which seek to differentiate the organisation from its rivals. It can thus be inferred that a highly engaged environment is a pre-requisite for coping with crises. Saji (2014) supports this by stating that employees who are engaged and feel supported are more inclined to put in discretionary effort particularly in times of crisis.

The importance of employee engagement particularly in times of crises cannot be overstated, especially given the threat that crises pose to engagement as argued by Tao et al. (2022) and in terms of Saji's (2014) argument mentioned above. To this end, scholars advocate that leaders should adopt a coaching management style, allowing for employees to freely voice concerns (psychological safety). Leaders should also recognise employee efforts and achievements in order to ensure that their subordinates feel valued (psychological meaningfulness) (Saks & Gruman, 2014; Grant, 2019; Ahmed, et al., 2020; Chanana & Sangeeta, 2021; Kewalramani, 2022; Gallup Incorporated, 2023). These factors point to how leaders should act to promote employee engagement, given the importance of engagement for organisational success.

Several scholars advocate that a positive leadership style enhances employee engagement (Popli & Rizvi, 2016; Grant, 2019; Decuyper & Schaufeli, 2020). In times of crises, however, Balasubramanian and Fernandes (2022) hold that no single leadership style can be employed. The authors maintain that heightened levels of uncertainty, particularly in the case of a global crisis such as Covid-19, warrant situational leadership, where leaders adapt to the current context to navigate their teams through the difficulties (Balasubramanian & Fernandes, 2022).

The increase in resignations and emergence of quiet quitting certainly suggest that employees have reset their priorities. The Coronavirus pandemic instilled fear in people. Facing the fear of death and bearing the loss of loved ones made many people question the alignment of their jobs with their personal values and sense of purpose (BusinessTech, 2022; Klotz & Bolino, 2022). Tao, et al. (2022) expand further that during times of uncertainty (crises) employee engagement actually wanes, which Reinwald et al. (2021) attributes to the additional pressure and concern surrounding the health and safety of themselves and that of loved ones. This leads to the central question that this study seeks to answer - what is the role of leaders in working with these

employees to foster employee engagement in times like these in the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal? The significance of the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal as a major contributor to the economy and in relation to disruptive events of Covid-19, the looting in July 2021 and the floods in April 2022 have been provided in the introductory sector to the study.

## **2.4. Summary**

This chapter unpacked the employee engagement and social exchange theories as the foundation for this study (Saks & Gruman, 2014; Grant, 2019; Ahmed, et al., 2020; Chanana & Sangeeta, 2021; Cherry, 2022). In addition, the relationship between the two theories was demonstrated given the reciprocal relationship between employer and employee (Grant, 2019; Reinwald, et al., 2021; Volini, et al., 2021). An analysis of existing literature then ensued in order for the researcher to establish the areas that needed to be focussed upon and, which provided foundation and direction for the study (du Plooy-Cilliers, et al., 2014).

The importance of leadership as a major influence on employee engagement was discussed in relation to the importance of workforce engagement as a factor of organisational success (Wellins, et al., 2005; Saji, 2014; Decuypere & Schaufeli, 2020). The review of existing scholarship suggests strategies that leaders can employ to enhance engagement with scholars stating that employee engagement should be woven into the culture of the organisation for competitive advantage (Popli & Rizvi, 2016; Grant, 2019; Gallup Incorporated, 2020; Gallup Incorporated, 2023). Some scholars advocate that a positive leadership style is pivotal for employee engagement (Popli & Rizvi, 2016; Grant, 2019; Lazim, et al., 2020).

Existing literature thus, proposes that leaders need to set direction and ensure that employees are adequately equipped with appropriate resources to confidently carry out their tasks. In so doing, creating an engaged workplace that will foster engaged employees who are loyal to the company and are prepared to exert extra effort in collaboratively achieving organisational goals (Wellins, et al., 2005; Saji, 2014; Ahmed, et al., 2020).

This led to discussion about the effect that crises such as the Coronavirus pandemic, looting and flooding has on employee engagement with some scholars advocating that leadership that fosters open, honest communication in these difficult times will engender trust and enhance engagement (Ahmed, et al., 2020; Collings, et al., 2021; Kewalramani, 2022). However, other scholars claim that the effect of these external forces causes employee engagement to weaken as fear and uncertainty come to the fore (Reinwald, et al., 2021; Tao, et al., 2022).

Notwithstanding this, the review of existing literature cements the significance of leadership on employee engagement and the subsequent effect that employee engagement has on organisational success (Wellins, et al., 2005; Saji, 2014; Decuyper & Schaufeli, 2020). In addition, the importance of leadership in times of crisis has been demonstrated as essential for organisational survival (Balasubramanian & Fernandes, 2022). Moreover, the importance of having engaged employees during times of crises has been highlighted as critical for organisational survival (Saji, 2014). This exposes the research gap as existing scholarship on the role of leadership in fostering employee engagement during times of crises, where engagement is more critical appears scant.

The next chapter sets out the research methodology used in the study.

## **CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **3.1. Introduction**

The previous chapter provided deep insight into the existing literature surrounding employee engagement and the role that leaders play in fostering this as an integral component for organisational success. The review of current scholarship also highlighted the research gap that this study seeks to address.

This chapter sets out the research methodology used in the study. Research methodology refers to the process of selecting, gathering, analysing, and interpreting information on a specific topic. The methodology plays a pivotal role in shaping the overall trustworthiness of the study (du Plooy-Cilliers, et al., 2014). This chapter thus outlines the research paradigm, research design, population, sample, data collection method and the data analysis method used in this study. In addition, ethical considerations surrounding the research is provided.

### **3.2. Research paradigm**

The primary purpose of all research is to create and expand knowledge about various phenomena (Ahmad, Wasim, Irfan, Gogoi, Srivistava & Farheen, 2019). All research is based on core philosophical suppositions about what represents sound research. This is known as a paradigm. Paradigms consist of beliefs and viewpoints that influence how researchers see the world (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). These philosophical perspectives shape how data is interpreted and thus guide the research study (du Plooy-Cilliers, et al., 2014; Antwi & Hamza, 2015; Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). du Plooy Cilliers et al. (2014) describe the research paradigm or research tradition as a specific approach of studying phenomena in a given area of study while Creswell (2008) simply defines a paradigm as a worldview.

Two of the main research paradigms are positivism and interpretivism. Positivist research seeks to determine causal relationships to predict and control events. Interpretivism, on the other hand aims to understand and explain social experiences (du Plooy-Cilliers, et al., 2014). Interpretivism thus focuses on developing insights via individual perceptions about the phenomenon being studied (Hussain, Elyas & Nasseef, 2013; Antwi & Hamza, 2015). Interpretivism holds that all social research should be viewed as interpretive because the study is informed by the researcher's desire to understand and interpret social reality (Hussain, et al., 2013). In contrast, positivists do

not believe that context is important and explain behaviour through measurable, quantifiable data (Antwi & Hamza, 2015).

While both paradigms contend that human behaviour may be planned and regular, positivists view this in terms of cause and effect. Interpretivists see patterns as being fashioned from meaning systems that are generated through social interaction (Antwi & Hamza, 2015; du Plooy-Cilliers, et al., 2014).

Research paradigms include the elements of ontology, epistemology, methodology, metatheory, and axiology (du Plooy-Cilliers, et al., 2014). Ontology refers to beliefs about reality while epistemology deals with what and how knowledge can be acquired. Methodology focuses on attaining knowledge (Wilson, 2014; Antwi & Hamza, 2015; Rehman & Alharthi, 2016). Metatheory provides a theoretical framework or foundation for a more refined way of describing phenomena. Axiology centres around what is valued within a paradigm (du Plooy-Cilliers, et al., 2014; Wilson, 2014). The researcher's view of these elements provides an interpretative framework that informs the entire research activity including approaches, methods, and analysis (Antwi & Hamza, 2015). Table 3-1 below, summarises the main differences between the positivist and interpretivist approaches according to the elements described above.

**Table 3-1: Dominant research traditions**

	<b>Positivism</b>	<b>Interpretivism</b>
<b>Epistemological</b>	Knowledge is deemed valid if produced from empirical observation	Knowledge is derived within social experiences and common sense is a significant source of knowledge.
<b>Ontological</b>	Reality is external, verifiable, and factual. It is governed by laws	Reality is fluid and subjective. It is constructed through social interaction and experiences
<b>Metatheoretical</b>	Proving causal relationships allows outcomes to be predicted.	Theory should tell a story so that detailed, deep understanding of others' reality can be gleaned
<b>Methodological</b>	Quantitative research is used to generate numerical data and facts. Reliability and validity are important	Qualitative research is used to develop understanding in human and social sciences – in other words to find the way people think and feel
<b>Axiological</b>	Truth, logic, and objectivity are valued	Uniqueness is valued

(Source: Adapted from du Plooy-Cilliers et al. (2014) and Ahmad et al. (2019))

This study sought to explore and understand the meaning that the research participants in the organisation under research give to a social problem (Creswell, 2008). The crises mentioned in the preceding sections of this study are social in nature and the employee /employer relationship is arguably a social construct in line with the social exchange theory (Volini, et al., 2021; Cherry, 2022). The research aimed to expand on existing knowledge by analysing how leaders perceive their role in fostering employee engagement during times of crisis in the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal. Based on the above, an interpretivist paradigm was thus selected and adopted for the study.

As perceptions and experiences differ between individuals of the organisation, it can be argued that reality is viewed as fluid and subjective (du Plooy-Cilliers, et al., 2014). This further justifies the suitability of the interpretivist paradigm for the study. The study did not seek to predict outcomes or determine causality, further supporting the interpretivist tradition (Hussain, et al., 2013; du Plooy-Cilliers, et al., 2014; Antwi & Hamza, 2015).

Interpretivists do not seek to prove a theory but use an inductive approach to assign meaning to the experiences and opinions elicited. This is done using qualitative methods, which include open ended questions, interviews, and focus groups. (Hussain, et al., 2013; du Plooy-Cilliers, et al., 2014).

Quantitative research methods, on the other hand, use closed-ended questionnaires. This limits the participants' ability to fully articulate themselves and the researcher cannot be sure of how the questions are being interpreted. Quantitative research methods are not designed to delve into complex human experiences (Hussain, et al., 2013; du Plooy-Cilliers, et al., 2014; Antwi & Hamza, 2015; Rehman & Alharthi, 2016).

An interpretivist approach allowed the researcher to interact with organisational leaders to understand their personal perceptions and experiences (du Plooy-Cilliers, et al., 2014; Antwi & Hamza, 2015) around the role of leadership in fostering employee engagement during times of crisis in the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal. The participants were able to speak freely in in-depth interviews which elicited candid opinions and viewpoints, Moreover, the semi-structured interview format allowed for clarity to be sought so that the full meaning of the participants' responses could be obtained (du Plooy-Cilliers, et al., 2014; Wilson, 2014; Antwi & Hamza, 2015).

Given that this study concentrated on the full complexity of human sense making (du Plooy-Cilliers, et al., 2014) of how leaders perceive their role in fostering employee engagement, the interpretivist paradigm was the most suitable choice for the study.

### **3.3. Research design**

The research design is the blueprint that is used to incorporate the elements of the study so as to effectively address the research question (du Plooy-Cilliers, et al., 2014; Sacred Heart University, 2019).

The sub-sections that follow will discuss the elements that were included in the research design for this study.

#### **3.3.1. Research approach**

This study used a qualitative approach in keeping with the interpretivist tradition as justified in the discussion about research paradigms. An exploratory case study approach was used (du Plooy-Cilliers, et al., 2014) to gain deep insight into real world problems to try and understand the concepts of leadership and employee engagement within specific, real-life crises, - in other words to examine the role of leadership in fostering employee engagement during crises in the KwaZulu-Natal commercial property sector. In using this approach, an understanding of underlying reasons and opinions could be established. Moreover, this method allows a thorough understanding of the lived experiences of the participants to emerge allowing an authentic representation of the case. In addition, the approach facilitated a better understanding of the phenomenon as it allowed the research problem to be thoroughly explored and clarity could be sought (du Plooy-Cilliers, et al., 2014).

#### **3.3.2. Research reasoning**

An inductive reasoning approach was used (du Plooy-Cilliers, et al., 2014). The researcher secured first hand data to understand perceptions about leadership and employee engagement in the organisation under research. This data was then analysed to uncover emergent patterns and trends.

### **3.3.3. Research time horizon**

A cross-sectional approach was used. This means that data was only collected once (du Plooy-Cilliers, et al., 2014). This means that a snapshot of the perceptions and experiences of the leaders in the organisation was obtained.

## **3.4. Population and sampling**

### **3.4.1. Population**

A population is the entire spectrum of people, entities or social artefacts that are affected by the research problem. (du Plooy-Cilliers, et al., 2014). This, in the broadest sense, means all leaders and employees in the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal affected by Covid-19, the looting and the floods. The broad population thus includes landlords, tenants, property managers and administrators in the province. With reference to this study, the population would include all leaders in the organisation who manage commercial property portfolios given that the aim is to examine the role of leadership in fostering employee engagement during times of crises in the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal.

### **3.4.2. Sampling**

It is not feasible, possible, or practical to reach the entire population. Moreover, by its very nature, qualitative research aims at obtaining an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under study. To this end, purposive sampling was used (du Plooy-Cilliers, et al., 2014). This non-probability sample method is a technique used to select specific people who are able provide the required information (i.e., they are the only ones with the information) or meet specific criteria identified by the researcher (du Plooy-Cilliers, et al., 2014). Given that the overarching research question is to determine the roles that leaders play in fostering employee engagement during times of crises in the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal, the sample included executive, senior and middle leaders of the organisation.

An email invitation to participate in the research study was sent to sixteen leaders in the organisation directly involved in managing staff in various property portfolios. However, it was subsequently discovered that two of the leaders included in the targeted sample, manage portfolios in Gauteng province and were thus not suitable for the study. In addition, one of the middle managers had tendered her resignation and thus declined to participate.

Ultimately, eleven semi-structured interviews were carried out with representation from the executive, senior and middle levels of management within the property management company selected for the research study. All five executive leaders were interviewed, and the senior and middle managers were selected upon recommendation from those executive leaders to obtain the most resource-rich and experienced leaders in the organisation. This ensured that there would be sufficient participants to obtain an in-depth understanding of the perception of leadership and employee engagement in the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal in times of crises. The sample size proved adequate as data saturation was reached at this point – in other words, no new information was forthcoming (du Plooy-Cilliers, et al., 2014).

Table 3-2 reflects the participants ages and their leadership level.

**Table 3-2: Participants ages and leadership level**

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Level</b>
P1	41	Executive
P2	50	Executive
P3	50	Middle
P4	52	Middle
P5	56	Executive
P6	48	Executive
P7	44	Executive
P8	36	Senior
P9	55	Senior
P10	42	Middle
P11	54	Senior

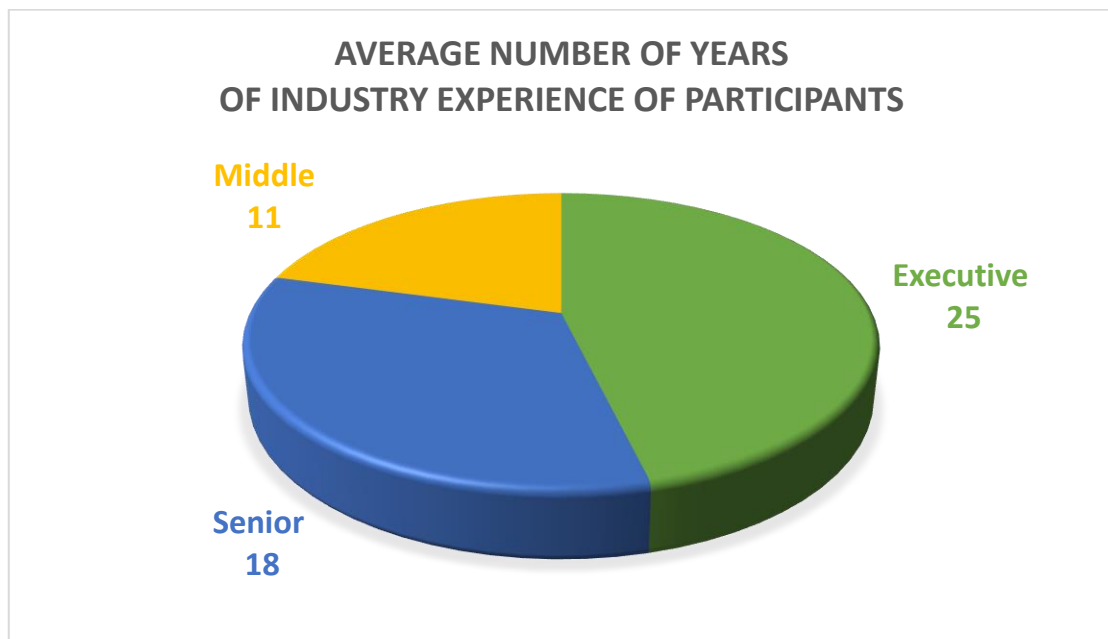
(Source: Constructed by researcher)

Table 3-3 below summarises the participants by level and number of years' experience in the property industry while Figure 3-1 represents the average number of years of experience across the three levels namely executive, senior, and middle management.

**Table 3-3: Participant level and industry experience**

Leadership Level	No of Participants	Cumulative Industry Experience
Executive	5	126
Senior	3	54
Middle	3	34
<b>Total</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>214</b>

(Source: Constructed by researcher)

**Figure 3-1: Average number of years of industry experience of research participants**

(Source: Constructed by researcher)

The information depicted in both Table 3-3 and Figure 3-1 above demonstrate that the participants are highly experienced and well placed to offer significant insight into determining the role that leaders play in fostering employee engagement in times of crises in the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal.

### 3.5. Data collection method

First-hand information about leadership and employee engagement in times of crises in the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal was gathered from the participants. In other words, primary data collection was used (du Plooy-Cilliers, et al., 2014).

This was achieved by carrying out in-depth interviews, using open-ended questions. The interviews were held individually and virtually, using Microsoft Teams. The interviews were recorded with permission from the participants. This permission is included in the informed consent letter that all participants signed. The informed consent letter is attached to this dissertation as Annexure A. The interviews were held in August 2023 and lasted on average between twenty and thirty minutes each.

This technique allowed the participants the opportunity to fully express their viewpoints and allowed for clarifying questions to be posed, ensuring that the participants' intended answers were accurately depicted. In using a standardised, open-ended format, all participants in the study were answering the same questions. The questions were constructed in relation to the research objectives and questions. The study objectives are listed here below for ease of reference:

- to determine how the crises affected the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal.
- to examine how employee engagement was affected by the crises in the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal.
- to identify the role that leadership plays in fostering employee engagement during times of crises in the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal.

Question two of the interview schedule was designed to answer the first research question, namely how the crises affected the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal. Questions four and five were devised to answer how employee engagement was affected by these crises. Questions three, six, and seven were geared towards answering the role of leadership in fostering employee engagement during times of crises in the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal. In addition, the questions were developed to avoid ambiguity and were phrased to elicit feelings, viewpoints, and experiences in keeping with an interpretivist approach. Using words such as "how" and "what", for example, encouraged the participants to provide information freely (du Plooy-Cilliers, et al., 2014). Moreover, the final question allowed the participants to add any further comments or thoughts to ensure every opportunity was provided for them to fully express their thoughts and experiences about leadership and employee engagement in times of crisis in the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal. The interview questions are attached to this dissertation as Annexure B.

The technique described above facilitated analysis as the views, experiences and opinions of the participants could be compared easily. The use of standardised questions ensured design

coherence, which added to the trustworthiness of the study. The element of trustworthiness is explored in more detail below (du Plooy-Cilliers, et al., 2014).

### **3.6. Data analysis**

Data analysis is the process of transcribing, analysing, interpreting, and presenting the data collected to discover useful information to answer the research questions (du Plooy-Cilliers, et al., 2014). In this study, qualitative content analysis (du Plooy-Cilliers, et al., 2014) was used. This method allowed subjective interpretation of the transcribed text based on information gathered from the interviews. This was achieved through a process of classifying and coding data and identifying patterns. In this way, emergent themes and patterns that could answer the research questions were discovered (du Plooy-Cilliers, et al., 2014).

Data analysis was carried out as follows:

#### **3.6.1. Data preparation**

After each interview, the recording and transcripts were downloaded from Microsoft Teams and saved in a secure folder (personal vault) that is password protected on OneDrive. The researcher then edited the transcripts to correct any errors in the automated transcript that was generated by Microsoft Teams. These errors arose due to pronunciation differences and accents. All the transcribed responses were read several times to determine which answers were useful. Multiple reading ensured understanding and assisted in finding similarities or differences in the participants' attitudes and perceptions about leadership and employee engagement in times of crises (du Plooy-Cilliers, et al., 2014).

#### **3.6.2. Definition of coding unit**

Data was grouped into smaller pieces to facilitate categorisation (du Plooy-Cilliers, et al., 2014). Categorisation is the process of classifying data into sets. Categories were identified through the reading and re-reading of the transcribed responses to establish words and phrases that were used repeatedly or themes that occurred often. (du Plooy-Cilliers, et al., 2014).

### **3.6.3. Development of categories and coding scheme**

In this step, associated coding units (key words) were grouped together to form a coding scheme (du Plooy-Cilliers, et al., 2014). Great care was taken to ensure that each code, theme, and category were comprehensive, specific, and mutually exhaustive to avoid confusion and overlapping (du Plooy-Cilliers, et al., 2014).

### **3.6.4. Testing of coding**

In order to ensure consistency and clarity of the coding scheme, a sample of the data was coded and checked to ensure that there were no ambiguity or inconsistencies. At this point errors were resolved to preserve the trustworthiness of the study (du Plooy-Cilliers, et al., 2014).

### **3.6.5. Coding**

All the data was carefully examined. Each transcribed response was read line by line to assign the coding unit to the data until there was no more data to code (du Plooy-Cilliers, et al., 2014).

### **3.6.6. Assessing the coding consistency**

The coding consistency was re-checked by repeating the exercise a few days later to determine if there were any errors. Errors were then corrected to ensure integrity (du Plooy-Cilliers, et al., 2014).

### **3.6.7. Interpreting data**

This stage involves interpreting the themes identified. Inferences were made using existing theories and the researcher's own interpretation of the meaning imbedded in the text (du Plooy-Cilliers, et al., 2014).

### **3.6.8. Reporting of methods and findings**

For the sake of transparency, the process used to code, analyse, and interpret the information is represented in Annexure D. The table provided in the annexure demonstrates the transformation of raw data into findings. The use of the table allowed the researcher to observe frequency and depicts the themes that emerged (du Plooy-Cilliers, et al., 2014).

### **3.7. Trustworthiness**

Interpretivism is often criticised for being too unsystematic and subjective. Richards (2003), cited in Rehman and Alharthi (2016) refutes the contention that qualitative research is “soft” (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016, p. 56) - he advocates that it demands thoroughness, accuracy, and meticulous attention to detail. This demonstrates that the research is trustworthy, which is a significant factor in qualitative research (du Plooy-Cilliers, et al., 2014).

#### **3.7.1. Credibility**

One of the measures of trustworthiness is credibility. In order to ensure credibility in this study, the interpretation of the results followed a careful coding system as detailed in the data analysis section. (du Plooy-Cilliers, et al., 2014). It is significant to note that from the outset, credibility was established through the selection of research participants that are leaders at various levels in the commercial property industry, thereby ensuring that data was interpreted in the correct context.

#### **3.7.2. Transferability**

Another element of trustworthiness is that of transferability. Critics argue that qualitative research methods may make the study unreliable and too specific to the point that findings may not be transferred to other situations or environments (Ahmad, et al., 2019). However, after analysis, the findings can be applied beyond the original research project to other similar situations through inference. This is known as transferability and further solidifies the trustworthiness of the study (du Plooy-Cilliers, et al., 2014; Antwi & Hamza, 2015).

#### **3.7.3. Bias**

The rigorous and structured process that was followed as detailed in the sections above, limits the concern raised by Kivunja and Kuyini (2017) that the researcher’s own interpretation may influence findings. Every effort was made to ensure that the findings truly emerged from the data collected.

### **3.8. Ethical considerations**

Ethics in research stems from the researcher's own moral and professional code of conduct that underpins behaviour and attitudes (du Plooy-Cilliers, et al., 2014). The researcher upholds a high standard of personal ethics, which was carried out throughout the study.

The importance of ethics in research is particularly significant given that there are many stakeholders who could be affected by the study (du Plooy-Cilliers, et al., 2014). It was therefore necessary to obtain approval from the organisation under research for the study to be carried out. In this regard, a gatekeeper's letter confirming permission to conduct the research was received.

Permission from the University of KwaZulu-Natal's Ethics Committee was obtained. No data was collected prior to receiving the ethics approval, which is attached as Annexure C.

All participants were fully informed about the study. The participants were advised that their participation was voluntary and that they were free to withdraw at any stage of the process. In addition, the anonymity of the participants was guaranteed (du Plooy-Cilliers, et al., 2014). To this end, participants were provided with a consent form confirming all the above and their willingness to take part in the study. The informed consent form is attached as Annexure A.

The interviews took place on a one-to-one basis, ensuring that the participant responses were not tarnished with the opinions of others and further ensuring anonymity and confidentiality. The interviews were recorded with participant permission in the informed consent form mentioned above. All information, recordings and documents received from the participants and / or the organisation is stored in the secure folder on OneDrive with strict password control.

Another important ethical consideration relates to avoiding harm. To this end, the participants were not placed in embarrassing situations or made to feel as if their career prospects in the organisation would be negatively impacted through their participation. The questions were thus structured to avoid this (du Plooy-Cilliers, et al., 2014).

### **3.9. Summary**

This chapter detailed the research methodology used in the study and the justification for the selected research paradigm and design. A qualitative research approach was used within the interpretivist tradition. Non-probability, purposive sampling was used to target resource-rich

leaders within the organisation. Primary data was collected through semi-structured interviews that took place online. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analysed. In addition, factors contributing to the trustworthiness and ethical considerations of the study were discussed.

The next chapter details the findings from a thematic analysis of the data obtained.

## **CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS**

### **4.1. Introduction**

The preceding chapter described the research methodology used in the study. The underlying research paradigm was explored and the sampling method, data collection and data analysis processes were explained. In addition, ethical considerations were described. This chapter focuses on the findings emanating from the thematic analysis from the responses received in the semi structured interviews.

### **4.2. Themes and sub-themes identified**

The interviews were transcribed, and a thematic coding analysis was undertaken to establish emergent themes (du Plooy-Cilliers, et al., 2014). The transition of codes to categories and from categories to themes is depicted in Annexure D.

The themes that emerged from the data analysis addressed the following research objectives:

- to determine how the crises affected the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal.
- to examine how employee engagement was affected by the crises in the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal.
- to identify the role that leadership plays in fostering employee engagement during times of crises in the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal.

These themes and sub-themes are summarised in Table 4-1 below and then explored further.

**Table 4-1: Themes and sub-themes identified**

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Sub-Themes</b>
Severe disruption to the property industry	Economic repercussions
	Unprecedented catastrophic events
	Rapid mobilisation
Balancing empathy and flexibility whilst ensuring business continuity	Employee wellbeing paramount
	Balancing family and work responsibilities
	Mental and emotional support
Expectations and pressure during these challenging times	Leadership challenges and expectations
	Increased workload
	Remote leadership and work challenges
	The crises exposed leadership weaknesses
Increased collaboration and teamwork	Stronger relationships
Communication is key	Open and transparent communication
	Continuous communication
	Facilitating communication

(Source: Constructed by researcher)

### **4.3. Severe disruption to the property industry**

The participants were asked how the multiple crises affected the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal. While the flooding of April 2022 did impact some of the buildings in the participant portfolios, the effect of this was not as severe as the other two crises, which were catastrophic.

*“In the industrial portfolio we had quite a bit of banks washed away which the insurers actually don't cover So that was just under R1,000,000 loss on the landlord because obviously, they had to dig into their pockets to do the repairs.” (P6)*

*“I had a just very few buildings where we had some water damage, but thankfully there was no massive impacts in terms of the flooding.” (P7)*

*“... in terms of the flooding no, it didn't impact me directly in any of my shopping centres that are under my portfolio.” (P4)*

Covid-19 severely disrupted the retail sector, especially smaller businesses, through closures, reduced revenues, lack of reserves, and unpaid rent. The civil unrest and looting exacerbated these issues. During the various levels of lockdown brought about by Covid-19, many retail tenants were unable to trade. This prevented them from generating income and resulted in staff layoffs. The financial repercussions of the pandemic emerged as the first sub-theme relating to the severe disruption that these crises caused in the property sector. This is explored below.

#### **4.3.1. Economic consequences of the crises**

*“I think Covid-19 really started the unfortunate cycle within the retail industry, especially with all the shops being closed and not being able to achieve income and retain their staff.” (P4)*

*“The lockdown period was very painful to the businesses in such a way that they couldn't generate income that will keep the doors open or that will keep their staff getting salaries that they require, so it was very, very difficult.” (P9)*

*Covid hit our commercial property sector very, very badly.” (P2)*

Tenants looked to the property management company to facilitate rent remissions from the landlords as a result of their inability to trade and generate income.

*“What I can say is that during the total lockdown, when there were no business that were operating - I think that was the first month of the lockdown - we could see the pressure that the businesses faced through the emails that we received seeking help from the landlords and what the managing companies can do for them seeing the crisis they were in and further to that when they were open because a lot of people were in the lockdown mode, they were not free to travel to shopping centres or wherever they needed to go. The income was very slow, so it affected the businesses drastically and I would say they didn't have any profits that they could depend on except getting from the previous month's savings or the turnover that they generated prior to the lockdown. The looting was very, very bad as well because the businesses lost almost everything that they had and the shelves were left empty. So that meant that they couldn't sell anything.” (P9)*

*“Covid-19 actually brought on a lot of unemployment uncertainty, and it really damaged the retail industry in terms of the total shutdown, the lockdown that we went through, with tenants being unable to trade. Therefore, having to now start minimising their staff. So, lots of staff retrenchments.” (P4)*

Landlords gave rental remissions to their tenants during the enforced lockdown levels during Covid-19 and when premises were destroyed in the civil unrest of July 2021.

*“There was quite a lot that came with Covid. We did a lot of credits to our tenants.” (P7)*

*“There were a lot of rental remission. There was ways of helping them to pay - rental deferrals” (P11)*

*“It was on retail and office where there was loss in rental.” (P6)*

Participant 2 added that should another incident of civil unrest take place, the private, smaller landlords would not be able to survive.

*“It (the looting) was a very, very frightening experience. I don't ever want to live through something like that again and I think the landlords that were affected with this... I don't think they will be able to sustain themselves if this ever happened again.” (P2)*

While the loss of rental and rental credits issued affected the landlord's revenue streams, the economic consequences for the smaller tenants seemed to be more severe.

*“Covid, 19, was overall a ripple effect on tenants. You know tenants, a lot of the smaller ones especially struggled. The Landlord was affected by rent reductions and things like that. But the smaller tenants did take a lot longer to get back on their feet and a lot of them actually even closed down. The smaller ones that were struggling or brands that were struggling couldn't come back from that experience.” (P10)*

The economic effects of both Covid-19 and the looting rippled through to property management companies as well who had to manage high arrears as tenants were unable to trade. Property management companies earn income through leasing commission and management fees that are based on rental collections.

*“Revenue wise, collections were down... Obviously buying power was affected as well. Shops were looted so tenants were not even operating, so it definitely affected our revenue...our arrears obviously skyrocketed.” (P11)*

*“It definitely affected our revenue” (P10)*

#### **4.3.2. Unprecedented chaotic events**

Covid-19 and the looting were characterised by most participants as unprecedented, the effects of which could not be anticipated and for which there was no clear roadmap as to how to navigate through these crises.

*“With Covid, and I don't think anybody really knew what to expect, and I think it was exactly that...the fear of the of the unknown. The same with the looting also, especially in KZN ... fear just gripped everybody.” (P1)*

*“There was a huge impact in terms of the property sector. Covid, which was completely unheard of ever before was not something that we've experienced.” (P7)*

One of the participants added that the initial perception of Covid-19 was that it would be very short-term with life and business returning to normal quickly.

*“Covid was interesting because I think it was the first time ever that in our generation and the previous generation and the next generation that we actually couldn't go shopping and we couldn't do the normal functional stuff. I think at first Covid was we'll be back in the office in a week because we haven't experienced that. And...it obviously didn't happen.” (P5)*

Fear and uncertainty compounded matters as leaders struggled to navigate around risk and safety issues.

*“So as managers we were there (during the looting) to do whatever we could. But we felt that our hands were also tied. We couldn't do much because of the risk that was involved, fearing for our own lives and for our own teams.” (P9)*

Moreover, as one participant stated no amount of planning or contingency measures could have prepared the industry for the looting.

*“It was devastating!” There's always plans where you know, contingency and all of those clever things that we put in place. But when it when it actually happens (looting)... it's just all men on board and you do what you need to do because no one expects a shopping centre to be burned to the ground, there's no contingency for that. It's like, how do we trade if this happens or this happens and it's all those little things, but it's never, ever something so drastic!” (P3)*

Participants generally felt that the repercussions of the looting were more severe than that of the pandemic. The pandemic was a national crisis and there was relief offered by the government and the landlords, but the looting was primarily in KwaZulu-Natal. While landlords had building insurance, many of the smaller retailers did not have sufficient, or in some cases, any insurance. Moreover, these tenants had no way of generating revenue while the rebuild was underway. Some of these smaller tenants could not recover and had to close their doors permanently.

*“Covid, 19, was overall a ripple effect on tenants. You know tenants, a lot of the smaller ones especially struggled. The Landlord was affected by rent reductions and things like that. But the smaller tenants did take a lot longer to get back on their feet and a lot of them actually even closed down. The smaller ones that were struggling or brands that were struggling that couldn't come back from that experience.” (P10)*

During the pandemic, which spearheaded remote work and fast-tracked e-commerce in South Africa, office workers could work from home and some retailers could essentially continue their operations during the less restrictive phases of lockdown. However, the looting destroyed premises, and everything was either stolen or damaged. The businesses had nothing.

*“Once lockdown gradually decreased and shops in the different retail sectors were allowed to open...when we thought the worst was over, we actually got hit with the worst of them all, which was the looting almost a year after the Covid struck down the retail industry, I think... the looting was - it was something that nobody, irrespective of whether you've been in the retail industry for 2 years, 20 years, 25 years, there was never, ever destruction of that magnitude that has taken place. I don't think anyone ever foresaw something of that magnitude ever taking place.” (P4)*

*“It was very traumatic. That much I can say at the onset, especially with the looting to go to a centre that's 100% functional and then to get there and it's in flames - it was the most emotional thing I've ever experienced in retail” (P4)*

*“Immediately after looting, they had to go back to suppliers and place their orders, and it was not even easy to get the stock on time because it affected the whole KZN and so all the businesses were trying to get stock at the same time and the suppliers couldn't meet the demand, which made it very difficult for them. So, the looting was even, I will say it was even worse than Covid.” (P9)*

*“With Covid, there was always the realisation that we were in a hard lockdown and that gradually the different retail would open to the public. With the looting there was... Would you survive? Everything was taken. Every single thing was taken up to and including papers, files, Every single thing. So, you basically had nothing left. Then it was the question of insurance. Does insurance pay? To what extent do they cover? Some tenants, one or two of the smaller tenants were unfortunate in that they did not have SASRIA cover. So how would they then replenish their stocks? How would they get the stuff back into their stores? There was literally nothing left. There was absolutely nothing left, so there was no. eventually, it would open - what we experienced in Covid - here there was nothing. There was nothing to open with. So that was the situation and that for me was for worse, and it left a lot of the retailers with question mark.” (P4)*

#### **4.3.3. The effects of the crises are still unfolding**

Many participants stated that the full effect of both the pandemic and the looting are still to be felt. In the case of the looting, centres that required extensive rebuilding, have not returned to trading levels prior to the crisis. This is particularly significant considering the effect that the Covid-19 pandemic had on the commercial property industry

*“I actually still believe that we still reeling from the effects from the looting and rioting because trade hasn't returned back to normal from prior to looting. We are still feeling that effect” (P8)*

Shopping patterns have changed as consumers are still trying to recover financially. Consumers are tightening their belts or trying to settle debt that accumulated whilst their earnings were affected through pay cuts or job losses.

*“I don't believe we have fully recovered in terms of shopping patterns. Yes, most certainly the feet is where it used to be but buying power is not quite where it used to be, but also your different categories are suffering more than they're probably would have if we didn't have Covid because people are now spending money on things that's crucial and no longer luxury items due to many reasons - a lot of people lost their jobs, a lot of people had pay cuts. A lot of people couldn't pay their bonds, and now those expenses are loaded back into their responsibilities. So that impacts directly on your retail income and your retail market and your different categories.” (P5)*

Participant 8 added that the cumulative effect of the crises and increased interest rates has affected consumers shopping patterns as far as purchasing luxury items is concerned.

*“I mean the country has been through a lot. I mean first Covid. Then you got your looting. Then we are sitting with the higher interest rates. Lots of people can't afford to have the luxuries anymore.” (P8)*

Moreover, this has affected the leasing strategies and tenant mix offering of some centres

*“When our leases are coming up for renewal, we are assessing our leases to see whether they are still providing a service to our community whether they are still in the right price range, whether they are offering convenience” (P8)*

The office sector was the hardest hit by Covid-19. This sector, whilst showing levels of improvement is still struggling and has not regained lost ground.

*“We saw a lot of downsizing and closing (of offices) at the time, obviously because people realised, they can do this work from home model. I think the office environment has taken the worst knock.” (P6)*

*“...hit the office market exceptionally hard because now we are sitting with vacancies that we certainly haven't seen in decades.” (P5)*

Trading levels in centres that required rebuilding have not recovered. Shoppers have moved to other centres and efforts to win them back are required.

*“We are probably still actually feeling the effects (of the looting) in one way or another. One of our buildings was pretty much burnt to the ground. We had a portion of it that was left almost untouched and could trade, and that was just one little shop really. That building has recently been rebuilt; it was launched again in October last year. The trading is not back to what it used to be.” (P6)*

*“There were two of our shopping centres that we manage that was very badly affected. The other three was partially affected and the rebuilding of the one is only the lost phase – it has only been launched now in August. So, loss of income. This obviously has a lingering effect where you're sitting with gearing now on buildings and you're sitting with other extended percentages ratios in terms of income to expenses because of the fact that you had to ensure you retain your tenants.” (P5)*

#### **4.3.4. Rapid mobilisation**

In terms of the pandemic, the leaders had to act swiftly, firstly in terms of remote working and secondly in terms of ensuring centres were Covid-19 compliant throughout the various levels of the lockdown.

*“We literally had to mobilise our teams within a very short space of time and over and above that, we had to prepare our tenants and get our buildings ready to be Covid compliant and this again is something that no one has ever had to do or at such short notice We had to get signage done. We had to get lines put up. I don't know if you remember getting those lines, how people had to queue. You had to educate your tenants as to how you now could only allow a certain number of shoppers at a time - we used to queue outside. So, all of that fell to the people managing the buildings and our security, our service providers, how to do it, then it was the PPE making sure that everyone had the necessary PPE. getting the sanitizers on site...” (P7)*

There were logistical implications in terms of adjusting signage and educating tenants as the lockdown levels were amended. The leaders also had to ensure they had the necessary permits in place for operational staff to go to their buildings.

*“If you had to get security on site or your building managers had to go on site. - and we had to shift gear quite quickly because if the Minister announced that now we're going to different levels or we tracking back a level, your signage must be up, the number of*

*visitors to your centres or your buildings or wherever - it was important that you maintain that. You have to support...your different tenants through this time as well because obviously this is not their game. Property management is not where their forte is.” (P5)*

*“We had all the necessary paperwork for those of us that were allowed to go out... essential workers. Everything in terms of that was quickly put out and drafted for us. We were quite prepared in terms of working remotely and business continued as per usual.” (P6)*

Participant 2 expanded that the leaders had acted with foresight in terms of preparing for remote work before the hard lockdown was implemented in March 2020.

*“When Covid initially started and everybody I think globally was wondering what this is about, we embarked on an exercise where we did a feasibility where everyone was asked to work from home to ensure business continuity because they were pre-empting that South Africa was probably going to go into lockdown as well.” So, we did that. We did a study where everyone had to work from home to ensure that there will be no interruptions in terms of 3G, networking, telephones etc. So that was very good for our company as a whole. So, when we did eventually go into the lockdown, we identified all the weak spots, we rectified it, and people were actually ready to go and work as if they were working from the office.” (P2)*

#### **4.4. Balancing empathy and flexibility whilst ensuring business continuity**

The participants emphasised the need for flexibility and empathy in leadership during times of crises. Despite the disruptions to trade and manufacturing, the property management business had to continue offering a service to the landlords and tenants. The leaders that were interviewed expressed that trying to maintain business continuity whilst accommodating these challenges was difficult.

*“I think it definitely brought brought to the forefront that we definitely in our industry need to be a lot more agile and I think people have addressed that model now where you can't just expect this traditional 8 to 5 working hours.... I think it brought a lot to the fore, that there is a lot more that goes on behind the scenes and the workplaces need to be a lot more flexible.” (P7)*

*“It was a very, very emotional time for everybody, but we had to remain very empathetic with the staff and I think we did that part very well.” (P2)*

*“I think the biggest thing was being supportive and understanding... supporting the staff by trying to be a little bit flexible in their working hours. I think it was trying to help solve find a balance between work life and home life because, I mean, the thing is, work still has to carry on, which is horrendous to say.” (P1)*

*“You still need to be output driven although you have to balance the humanity and the leadership and the guidance and the support you still have to have output because you still have to earn an income for your company. So, you can keep your staff and pay salaries.” (P5)*

*“We had lots of almost think tank sessions to see how we could get everyone connected because again on the back end of this (looting) work still needs to happen. Besides the landlord and other regions didn't quite understand what was going on. The people just had to carry on working” (P7)*

*“The operations managers during the Covid time, they and understandably, were very afraid to go out to the buildings because the rest of the admin staff, we were sitting at home but operations, the wellbeing of your buildings had to continue. We had those special permits for people who could go out and operations managers were given those, but there was a reluctancy from them. But I understand why because no one understood what or how the pandemic was going to affect people. And you were hearing people dying at that time. So that I think was one of the biggest challenges when it came to staffing.” (P2)*

*“So, I think that that was very challenging... to gauge really how your staff is and how they're coping and also to ensure there's continuous output because right throughout, although not 100% functional our industries that we are in were all rendering a service to the communities.” That was the other challenge to make sure there's productivity, there's output. Then there's staff members that disappeared for days that went into severe depression.” (P5)*

#### 4.4.1. Employee wellbeing is paramount

Notwithstanding the importance of business continuity, most of the participants stressed that employee safety and wellbeing was always the most significant consideration. The leaders stressed that employee welfare was always at the centre. Where staff were unable to cope, they were encouraged to log off, rest and try to resume their duties later. In some instances, work was reassigned to, for example, a staff member who did not have the compounding challenges of looking after children whilst trying to fulfil work obligations.

As participant 8 put it

*“Look, any company without the employees are nothing, so you need to engage with the employees... I mean they are the heart of the whole industry or the heart of the company ... they are the company.” (P8)*

The health and safety of staff members and their families was the most important consideration. Leaders expressed that this was a priority.

*“Look, it was basically safety that everybody was concerned about and that actually came first. So, if you were not feeling safe to come to work, then you worked from home.” (P11)*

*“If you're afraid to go into the buildings and you don't really want to go out, just do a drive by to check that everything's okay. Stay in your car, speak to maybe the security guard via your car but put your safety first. Put your family safety first but understand that the business has to continue, but not at the risk of your personal safety during that time (Covid) and during the looting time as well.” (P2)*

*“We don't want to infringe on your health or put you in any serious risk. because nothing, nothing is more important than the person themselves.” (P2)*

*“If you are sick, take time off, if your family needs help, then stay at home and help them” (P11)*

The looting resulted in a shortage of food and other essential supplies. The most senior executive member in the KwaZulu-Natal office arranged for food, nappies, baby formula and the like for the employees that were unable to secure these items for their families.

*“We actually engaged with a few retailers that opened up for staff. The company that we work for provided vouchers to our staff for them to go buy the necessities during that time, because I know most of the most people in the areas couldn't even get a loaf of bread. So, we made arrangements – we got our staff vouchers. We made sure that they were taken care of first.” (P8)*

*“(The leader) arranged for centres that were not looted, for centre managers to go, who were able, when it was safe enough to go to the centres and speak to the major stores there, and arranged for baby nappies, milk, bread, anything that a staff member may have required. And when it was safe enough, staff could come to the office and collect it. So, that was an amazing thing. And I tell you....staff were very appreciative about that” (P2)*

*“My senior - when there was shortages on the food - they opted to try and assist staff by utilising one of our centres and nationals and arranging someone to collect stuff so we could come and fetch from the office.” (P6)*

The flooding of April 2022 caused major damage to water infrastructure leaving many people without access to fresh water. The organisational leaders demonstrated care for their staff once again by arranging for water to be collected by the employees.

*“With regards to the flooding, what happened was a lot of us were affected with water shortages and again it was amazing, staff were allowed to come the offices with their water bottles full up as much water as you wanted. Landlords were who had water in their buildings allowed for staff to go and actually take water from there. So that was that was really, amazing. I don't think I'll ever forget the kind gesture during the looting time and during the water crisis time because the water crisis affected a lot of people for a very long time after the flooding.” (P2)*

#### **4.4.2. Balancing family and work responsibilities**

The shift to remote working as a result of the pandemic, proved challenging to employees who were trying to meet their work obligations whilst home schooling their children, taking care of sick family members or being ill themselves.

Participant 7 explained that it brought a realisation that

*“Your staff are actual people, that they have a life outside of work...When people had Teams meetings you would see their kids running around. So regardless of whether it's a pandemic or not, because now that that has passed, there are still instances where people can't make it to work or can't do this or can't do that because there is something that's going on and I think that work just needs to be able to understand that. Listen, as long as it's not all of the time, but when somebody needs something that as a workplace, you are there to support them”. (P7)*

*“Everyone was also facing their own demons being at home, you know, them getting Covid, family getting Covid, people dying that they know, home schooling, which I think was also a huge thing. So, it was trying to find a balance between all of that” (P1)*

*“It was from being sort of over emotional - I can't do this. I can't phone for the rent. I can't execute my function. I'm just too terrified. Oh, and also, I've got three or four kids at home. I must look after them. I must feed them. I don't have the capacity all the time to still get through all my work. Can you give me some help? So, there was tremendous challenges in the workforce up to the leadership where we had to be very understanding and very supportive and we had to think outside the box and come up with solutions. And frequently we had to allocate work on a temporary basis to other team members that was maybe in a better situation than the other team members” (P5)*

*“Some of my subordinates had little kids and working from home is not always...possible, I would say because you don't have that space where you could say, look, I'm going to lock up and just continue working” (P11)*

#### **4.4.3. Mental and emotional support**

The organisation placed a lot of emphasis on mental health and provided support for their employees.

*“You check up and you tell HR these are the 10 people that you think is really going downhill in terms of their emotional health and I will check up on them daily as well.” (P5)*

*“We were working harder than we'd ever worked before. Honestly, it was difficult. But I think if you ask anybody, that initial Covid time, we just worked long, long hours. So, we*

*had to understand that staff, certain staff just couldn't cope. So, I had to say to them, then log off, put your computer off, go get an hour's sleep. When you're ready to log on again, do that because your mental health and your physical health is of core importance.” (P2)*

*“During the looting, it was a lot on the facilities, the managers because it was like you had to know what's happening. You had to keep up to date. So, there was a lot of lack of sleep But overall, the higher levels were understanding and were checking on us and saying if you'll need to rest, rest.” (P10)*

*“Gosh, they went through a lot of things personally. I would say a lot of them even were depressed and employee engagement means not just checking in to find if everything is okay with work. There was a lot of behind the scenes. What's going on with you personally? How has this impacted you? Where do you need assistance? Provide support, almost mental health checks” (P7)*

*“(The company) offered counselling to any staff which were affected or even if they weren't affected directly. We would... see how everybody is and what was going on, not just work wise, but personally wise because as I said, everyone was struggling with their own demons and but also trying to make these meetings fun and interactive to also get everyone's minds off everything what was actually going on in the background.” (P1)*

*“Everyone felt isolated. So, I think that was one of the most challenging times. That's where our company did come again into the picture and they had weekly meetings where the team came in and we had fun games we played online...just try to maintain the relationship and then you get called out... tell us about how you feel about working from home and isolated from everyone - those kinds of things. So, I think that also it helped us understand where the next person was and whether they were in a good space, whether they were not in a good space, how we could help them, what their challenges are working from home.” (P8)*

*“There was a lot of working from home, so I think that also benefited the, the employees quite a bit and it helped us well basically keeping ourselves safe, keeping our families safe. And there wasn't this stress and saying, look, I've got to go to work, or my job is at risk.” (P11)*

Participant 5 emphasised that leadership played a critical role during the crises.

*“I think leadership was very important. The calmness, the guidance, the infrastructure that you had within your company was crucial.” (P5)*

*“They were trying to help by getting people involved that are more like specifically for like mental issues or, you know, issues with your kids. I know there was lots of videos that came up weekly from HR to assist in the Covid times. There was also messages from like the higher level about specifically with looting, who needs assistance, who needs help with this... I know from our HR level as well, there was emails that went out...it was like a motivational every week, like a check-up; what's happening. They had people that would come on that were like psychologists or things like that. The people that would give us advice on how to do things and how to get back to normality in a way... it was very helpful as well.” (P10)*

#### **4.5. Expectations and pressure during these challenging times**

The participants expressed that the crises amplified the demands on leaders, and this cascaded down to their teams. Many participants felt that the expectation on them as leaders was very high.

##### **4.5.1. Leadership challenges and expectations**

Two of the five executive level leaders expressed a lack of support from the C-Suite of the organisation.

*“There were one or two people, like from our head office, from our Joburg offices that touched base, just to say, hey, how are you guys doing? But there was nothing from a higher level of leadership like from our COO or our CEO that almost intervened to say listen, the people here are going through something. You know, chatted to our clients and said maybe they're not able to work right now, that didn't happen. So, we still had to deliver.” (P7)*

*“So I would think the one challenge was that during like the looting and the flooding, it was very much a KZN issue and bear in mind we report into landlords and head offices that are not based in KZN and they were very removed from the situation and I felt as though they needed to be a lot more sympathetic to what was going on and it also shows the cracks that if something happens in one region another region is not able to pick up for them” (P7)*

*“I don't know if your really senior, your directors and your CFOs and COOs - if it's because they're too far removed from reality, because that involvement was minimalistic, and it can also be on a pocket basis... but I do think that's quite important that you then schedule say once a week you speak to the whole company on Teams, you see how they are, you don't limit it to certain levels, it just gives your staff more comfort hearing from you than the people they always hear from...and I think it's always challenging if you are very far removed from your business. So, I think that that might be a way forward.” (P5)*

Several leaders felt immense pressure with subordinates depending on them for support and guidance whilst they themselves were trying to navigate the crises and meet expectations from their leaders and clients.

*“I also am a human being. I'm just like every person, just like my staff. The staff under me are looking to me for emotional and professional support. I also should have – at that stage - said I also need that professional and emotional support because it was like I said, it was a very difficult time in terms of the demands of the landlord. I think in hindsight, if anything I've learned and if anything, I'll tell my staff is put your hand up and ask because one thing I've realised is that leaders are not mind readers.” (P2)*

*“You have to speak up if you are needing something. What I feel is that people expect the leadership team to have the answers and it's not always like that. It's a two-way stream.” (P2)*

*“Personally, I think it was a lot of pressure because staff expected us to have all the answers and I think it started with Covid... This was something that none of us knew and as soon as something happened, obviously, we were the first points of call, but we necessarily didn't have all the answers and staff looked at us for the answers.” (P1)*

Despite these pressures, leaders at the middle and senior levels, expressed that the support of their leaders proved instrumental in assisting them to guide their teams through these uncharted waters.

*“There was always the presence of the leadership, so we were never left with the doubt of how do we do, what do we do next? There was always the guidance that came through” (P4)*

*“I think leadership was good on our side. We did get all the support we needed.” (P3)*

*“There was a lot of understanding and support from senior management and that obviously cascaded from me onto my subordinates.” (P11)*

#### **4.5.2. Increased workload**

Both Covid-19 and the looting increased the burden on the property management professionals. Schedules and tracking sheets had to be compiled per tenant in order for landlords to consider rent remissions. The looting, although a shorter duration than the pandemic resulted in the leaders and staff working extraordinarily late hours, communicating via cell phone from the early hours to late at night.

*“There was a lot more admin that went on behind the scenes. We had to open up new GL codes, do extra billing runs so there was a lot that happened with Covid” (P7)*

*“There was a lot more information that was needed and schedules and letters that need to be sent out. So, there was a lot of more of a demand obviously going on under those circumstances as well. I think for certain levels, the workload was a lot. So, that was a bit difficult.” (P10)*

*“I literally spent the entire looting week on the phone with somebody or the other on my team more from a support perspective, but also in assisting them because not everyone has the necessary contacts to arrange for things, so it's almost fell to me to arrange additional security, mobilise this, mobilise that because I've got different relationships. I would say I've been in the industry for a long time, so if I need a favour, I know who to call and literally you had to pull favours to get things done. But I was literally with my team - I don't think. like I said, I didn't sleep for one week” (P7)*

*“It became too much because it was really, really difficult at that time from landlords, which during the Covid time because remember people weren't trading especially in the retail shopping centres and then landlords were wanting these schedules upon schedules upon schedules...you know, the cost of hourly trade, what the cost was, etc. So, we were doing hundreds and hundreds of manual schedules. And it was resulting in burnout because we were working harder than we'd ever worked before.” (P2)*

Leaders had to balance their own personal fears and pressure with the increased demands by their seniors.

*“Whilst our employers offer you the support and the backing, I also just think that sometimes they need to understand that we are also human. The looting was at 15 centres, but it was also affecting us in our personal homes...and I mean the working conditions - whilst the communication was there - you were still expected to work ridiculous hours. So, you were stressed because these guys were coming into your neighbourhoods and our husbands were going out to create blockades...your kids at home... constantly on the go. I used to be on the phone from literally around 5:00 in the morning until way into late hours of the night. So, the requirements that were placed on me would need to be filtered down to get the onsite information. So, I was then passing the same expectation onto the people that report into me” (P4)*

*“It's like nobody understands what you're going through, or It's just work, work, work, work and also there was health issues. Some of us were sick and, you know, when you're sick, you can't be expected to perform your duties like normal. But there was nothing like that, so you were expected to produce the results whether you sick or not.” (P9)*

#### **4.5.3. Remote leadership and work challenges**

Remote working especially in the lockdown period of the pandemic was mainly seen as difficult by the participants. Several participants felt that being away from the office and not being able to physically interact with their colleagues was challenging.

*“Working remotely, whilst you can do it, it probably slows down the work rate... you actually lose a bit of touch with employees and staff when you actually are remote, I find it better to be back in the office and you know in the fray with people, that you understand what they're going through when - they frustrated and that sort of thing and also I think for the company culture. And I think you can quickly lose that when you're not all together in the office. So, when you are remote you don't actually pick up when someone's feeling overworked, overwhelmed, unless they actually come out and really state it on e-mail or something whereas in the office you can pick up on body language, mood swings and that sort of thing.” (P6)*

*“Covid was, I think, one of the most difficult times for us because we couldn't see each other in the first three months of this thing. So, we were more sitting on the Zoom calls or Teams meetings and those kind of things. I think it really took a toll on the team because they want to be out of there, out at the centre, you know, getting out and engaging with customers. I mean that's, you know in our industry, I mean that's what we do. That's what we are. It's more of the customers, the relationship between our shoppers, our tenants - those kinds of things. But it did take a toll on us, whereas you could see that there was a break in relationship at that point.” (P8)*

The absence of interaction meant limited collaboration and discussion.

*“If you work from home, you don't have the challenges of your opinion or your output, etc. You work sort of very much on this is what I do and this is how I do it. So, you sort of stop your own growth and development.” (P5)*

Remote working challenged the traditional ways of working and as one participant put it, leaders had to trust that their team will deliver what is required.

*“We had to mobilise our teams to go completely remote...It's also a new way of working with your team...I think just have to have trust in your team that they will do what's required of them and I must be honest, the team always comes to the party. So, it may not be your traditional 8 to 5 working hours, but they did it as and when they could.” (P7)*

After the hard lockdown was lifted and workers returned to the office in stages, there were mixed reactions from staff.

*“When we started phasing back, coming back to the office was very diverse. After Covid, there was a very diverse group. One group didn't want to go home. They didn't want to just work 2-3 days a week in office. They didn't want to work from home at all. And the other group was like. No, I'm not going to the office now... So, it was very diverse and we still have issues where we actually eventually let staff go because they don't want to work in the office and unfortunately you can do that if your output is sustainable, but if you start drifting and it causes more of a management crises for you to work at home than being here, then it becomes quite difficult.” (P5)*

Managing teams remotely proved challenging at times especially as far as ensuring work obligations were fulfilled and in the extra effort required to check in on team members.

*“There were tight deadlines and if a person was unable to work at the time or there are delays then that was holding everything back. It was a big challenge because, you know, when something is due it's due. So, it meant that you are holding back the entire team, when you couldn't produce what is expected from you, so we will end up using the phone talking to each other, trying to make things happen or to do work for the person that is unable to log in” (P9)*

*“I think the challenge is you get sort of very wrapped up in your own environment, so, it's almost you've got to make concerted effort to keep reaching out to staff to check that everything's okay and well, that the workload is okay or whatever the case may be, but for me, it was, you had to constantly keep reaching out. It wasn't just like natural – when you're in the office and you talk on a day-to-day basis. So, I think everybody is like that you sort of get wrapped up in your work environment...that's where your focus is” (P6)*

#### **4.5.4. The crises exposed leadership weaknesses**

Leadership styles and the relationships that leaders have with their subordinates exposed leadership weaknesses.

*“I think your leaders that thought that it was just a title and had an entitlement attitude probably had the hardest time throughout this because they really had to make an effort to get through all the challenges successfully with their team intact and with output intact. When you're not operational and close to your staff, you can't all of a sudden (be so) today because it's now Covid or these riots or floods. Now I'm going to over communicate with you and I'm going to now see how you are and I'm going to manage your output, etc. You can't just start that in a day. So that was a process for those leaders. The leadership where's there's always support and involvement etc probably also took a bit of a knock in terms of you know, over compromising because you also need to look after yourself in terms of not being emotionally and physically exhausted and the days were exceptionally long. Our first Teams used to start at 7:00 and we used to end at about 10:00 at night because of the shifting gears and incidents happening all over all the time in all three categories (crises), I would say that that was the challenging aspect on leadership and a lot of people stepped down” (P5)*

*“It’s the relationship you have with your team. If you’re a manager who says do this, do this, do that. You know you don’t really care what they are going through in their lives and all those things. They will do bare minimum and go home. But if you are a manager that leads by empathy and support in not just their jobs, they will give you the support that you need when you need it. I just think it’s overall how you communicate with your staff all the year through, not just when you need them in terms of crisis” (P3)*

#### **4.6. Increased collaboration and teamwork**

Several participants added that traditionally, portfolios run independently of each other but during the looting particularly there was increased collaboration and pooling of resources. This collaboration was not limited to role players within the organisation

*“I would say everyone banded together simply because we had to rely on besides just (our company), other property companies as well. So, it’s all of the professionals in the sector - we had to chat to each other.” (P7).*

*“We usually work on our separate teams, so each team will work on their own and do whatever they do. But during Covid we were working together so we have to communicate and make sure that we understand what we need to do and from that time up until now, when we’ve got tasks to do. we meet together and work on whatever we need to work on and make sure that you are all on the same line and understand what is required in order to achieve that result at the end.” (P9)*

*“What I also learned as a leader is to involve the communities... so with your shopping centres, we are close to your communities. Involve your communities as far as possible send newsletters out to the staff that are on site in your shopping centres - that please can they come to these areas and sort of protect their areas in their neighbourhood.” (P5)*

*“And then, like a day later, or two days later (after the looting), the entire community came together to help clean and sort things out, you know? So, I think it was as much as it tore people apart it also brought the community together.” (P1)*

Some participants added that the combined efforts of those affected by the crises, resulted in enhanced problem solving.

*“I would say, it was an eye opener and it helped us realise that we, need each other. When I'm saying each other, not only people working for (our company) as a managing agent, but others as well because we face the same problems. And when we engage and talk about these things, it helps us find some solutions quicker.” (P9)*

*“There were a whole lot of other people, all the other shopping centres, started communicating and they were like, use this person for roofing and use that person for that. So, it brought it brought a lot of other shopping centre managers closer. Like I say, initially everyone did what they needed to do. There were lots of people offering to help that didn't really need to, which I thoroughly appreciated. (P3)*

*“...especially during the looting - It's like, what are you doing now? What resource do you have? How can we pool resources?... There was a lot of coming together just to see how we can almost resolve the crisis.” (P7)*

One of the participants expanded on collaborating across portfolios in functional areas also facilitated problem solving.

*“In terms of operations have say all your different levels of employees. So if it's your, your rent collectors have a group for them and say every second day or third day from 12 to 1, we all on teams and you tell us what type of feedback you're getting from your tenants and what type of challenges are they throwing your way so we can brainstorm how we going to solve this - so I think much more collaboration than what we had previously” (P5)*

#### **4.6.1. Strengthening of teams**

The participants felt that the crises helped teams to forge stronger relationships as they united to navigate the storms.

*“We were like a support group to each other as well trying to help each other along with these issues or with these problems or assisting each other” (P10)*

*I believe that this crisis actually brought us more together. I mean, every company has their issues or employees have their problems. However, in my portfolio, the moment this crisis happened, I think all the staff got together and they created another bond. I mean,*

*they took it up to another level... But I mean I when it comes to this kind of things and crisis your staff are there, they're willing to work. It's just that communicate to them and see what strengths they have. Identify, what strengths your staff have - you might not have the same strengths as the other - however working together, you would have a full...basically a round ball." (P8)*

The participants expressed that the support and assistance offered across teams enhanced relationships.

*"We are all here to try and help each other and build each other up so as much as everybody somewhat like everyone had a bad day at some stage, but it's showing that support to each other and building each other up when we each person is going through it and I think that's actually brought the team together a bit more I would say." (P1)*

*"You could see the employees were just helping each other out. If the heads of department were in meetings, you get a manager from this centre helping the managers in other centres...it brought the entire team together. We understood where individual strengths were, and we rolled out the strength throughout our portfolio." (P8)*

The teams were supportive and helpful, going the extra mile where needed. There was a sense of togetherness as people worked together to navigate unfamiliar terrain.

*"The team stuck together. When this happened, you saw the true colours of your staff, you saw the true colours of employers. You saw how they all stuck together. They maintained the relationship between each other. we didn't... the leaders didn't even have to get involved. The staff saw another staff member in trouble or basically are battling and they just got on board, and they just jumped in, and they said guys, do you need help?" (P8)*

*The team...must always be available for one another to help and to see what each other needs and in terms of performing our duties, we need to help each other because it's something that was new to us. So, some of the things that are expected to be done, nobody understood the process fully. So, we needed each other to discuss" (P9)*

*"So, there was a lot of team effort (in my) direct team. We worked together. I live close by (the centre) as well. So, I mean, I was here as well to come assist. My team is also very*

*good with all working together as a team. So, we all were here helping each other, checking on each other, phoning, who needs, help helping, speaking to the security, the cleaning everybody to make sure we all on the same page and assisting where we can, even our tenants.” (P10)*

*“Lots of people did get closer and you, you did connect with other people because you are also looking for help. How are you all doing things? You know, you get closer to the other managers because they also going through the same thing. You know, we're all in the same struggle type of a thing” (P10)*

#### **4.7. Communication is key**

The importance of communication in times of crises and in as far as employee engagement is concerned was highlighted by the participants.

*“We believe the communication was one of the key factors – the key was always the communication. We always knew every time what was happening. The support system was always in place. Communication is the key for employers to employees. Find out in what space they are in firstly whether they are safe, whether they need help. Communication would be the best tool that I would say any employer should use key.” (P8)*

*“I must say, (my senior) was very - in the Covid times – very good in reaching out...on a regular basis and getting updates.” (P2)*

*“The biggest challenge to me was the staff that wouldn't stay in contact and that wouldn't speak, and that would just withdraw.” (P5)*

##### **4.7.1. Open and transparent communication**

The importance of open, clear, and transparent communication was highly emphasised by all the participants.

*“You have to speak up if you are needing something. What I feel is that people expect the leadership team to have the answers and it's not always like that. It's a two-way stream.” (P2)*

*“Ask them... Don’t just assume everybody’s in a bad place or everybody’s okay or whatever and do what you always do as leader and run with it. Sit down and say okay let me as far as possible, let me have one-on-ones or if my teams are too big let their leaders have one-on-ones and just say how are you feeling? How is this impacting on you? What are your fears? What can we help you with? What is your output challenges?” (P5)*

Communication was viewed as the cornerstone of employee engagement.

*“I think it (employee engagement) is all being part of a team and communicating with everybody and everybody being on the same page showing that we are all part of the bigger picture.” (P1)*

*“(Employee engagement is) open lines of communication with your employees.” (P6)*

*“Communication, communication, communication, which I find very lacking in this age and time, and you’d think with all those social media ways of communicating, it would be so much easier. So, it’s like easier to communicate, but we do so much less of it. I think people... unconsciously... we build silos... so that’s my job, your job, that kind of thing, you know, instead of the bigger picture. So, in terms of employee engagement, not Everyone knows what’s happening with their next person. So, sometimes two people are doing the same thing and all it would have taken is a telephone call or an e-mail saying this is where I am, this is what I’m doing” (P3)*

#### **4.7.2. Continuous communication**

The participants emphasised that continuous communication was important to ensure that all staff were informed of events and expectations. This was particularly important when teams were working remotely and during the looting so that all role players were abreast of current developments and could plan accordingly.

*“Your leadership in terms of continuous communication. Every morning, every afternoon, every evening with your teams, to see how they are personally, so I would spend time on how are you? (P5)*

*“Keep employees informed at all times, and especially in times of crisis. You need to make sure that they know what's going on.” (P9)*

*“Being in constant contact with the teams - we used to have weekly Zoom meetings” (P1)*

The importance of communication for problem solving and clear information flow was also highlighted.

*“So, I think it has in a way made us aware of what types of communication we need on a regular basis. So, it doesn't matter whether I'm the manager, you are the admin person. So, all of us need to talk, because everything that happens affects us all at the end, we work as a team. We need to know the way forward. How do we handle things going forward?” (P9)*

*“I mean our phones used to ring continuously - tenants not knowing what's going on, people phoning, what's happening? So, we have to keep everybody in the loop and trying to keep everything... so there's no stress and anxiety that's happening.” P10*

*“The communication was always there and was always filtered down to the various levels...there was always that communication with the employee...the employer was there to assist the employees and also on a personal level because whilst the looting was happening at our workplace, it was also happening within our communities as well. So, there was also correspondence and lots of correspondence, a lot of reassurance from our employer side... and again the communication was always there, they were always checking up.” (P4)*

*“The communication was good. We always knew what was happening at the centres in terms of security. If we needed to increase security, if there was another immediate threat” (P4)*

#### **4.7.3. Facilitating communication**

The leaders stated that every effort was made to ensure that teams had the necessary infrastructure and access to maintain communication whilst working remotely and in navigating the looting crisis.

*“The channels were open, we had Teams, we had WhatsApp groups, we bought them airtime continuously. We uploaded the additional airtime, we linked everybody to our switchboard with their cell phone so they could phone, and the bill went onto our phones. So, certainly the channels were all open. in terms of communicating.” (P5)*

*“Covid taught you to think differently, to evaluate things differently, to think outside the box, to think about how you're going to get hold of somebody... Just different groups that you created where people live in the same area so they could run across the street and give people messages etc. So, it prepared us very much to think outside the box and create communication which is the key fundamental of any emergency. (P5)*

*“When we were in the office, we were always engaged...chatting and well, Zoom and Teams made it possible (when we were at home) ...” (P11)*

*“We had WhatsApp groups ... and so there was a lot of communication around what was happening and just constant updates, especially from our risk department and fed downwards” (P6)*

#### **4.8. Summary**

This chapter presented the findings obtained from the data that was collected and evaluated using thematic analysis. Five main themes were identified and presented together with their sub themes. The findings uncovered how the Covid-19 pandemic, the looting and floods affected the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal, addressed leadership challenges of balancing empathy and providing staff support whilst ensuring business continuity, as well as the increased pressure and expectations in these challenging times. In addition, increased collaboration and teamwork were identified and the importance of communication was expressed as being critical to employee engagement.

The next chapter will detail the discussion of results in accordance with the role of leadership in fostering employee engagement during times of crisis in the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal.

## **CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION**

### **5.1. Introduction**

This previous chapter presented the findings that were obtained from semi-structured interviews with eleven leaders from a property management company. The sample size of eleven was sufficient in that data saturation had been reached. In this chapter, the findings will be discussed in relation to existing literature on leadership and employee engagement in times of crisis in the context of the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal. In addition, the findings will be aligned to the research questions, which were developed around the central aim and purpose of this study which was to determine the role of leadership in fostering employee engagement in the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal during times of crisis.

### **5.2. Severe disruption to the property industry**

The first research question centred around how the crises affected the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal. The aim of this question was to provide a background and context to the central questions surrounding leadership and employee engagement during times of crises in the commercial property sector, which is an important contributor to the country's GDP.

The participants expressed that the Covid-19 pandemic and the looting had devastating consequences for the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal. The analysis of the findings therefore uncovered that these crises were chaotic and unprecedented, causing severe disruption to the industry. The double impact of Covid-19 and the civil unrest saw a retraction in trade by 5.5% in the third quarter of 2021 (Stats SA, 2021). Notably, the South African economy was already in a dire state before the Covid-19 pandemic (Matli, 2020; Redda, 2021).

The effect from an economic perspective had far reaching consequences such as business closures, job losses, and downsizing (Redda, 2021; Vhumbunu, 2021). Lepere (2023) supports the findings that the pandemic caused severe harm to the commercial property sector particularly in the retail and office arenas. In addition, high vacancy levels in commercial property buildings translate to lower rental income for property owners. This is not only in terms of empty shops and offices but also in terms of achieving lower rentals on renewals or new lets as tenants have more bargaining power (Lepere, 2023).

The findings revealed that the impact on small businesses was most severe. Given that SMMEs play a vital role in the South African economy from an innovation, job creation and economic growth perspective, and considering that they contribute significantly to the GDP, the impact of these crises is apparent. Research undertaken in 2017 reveals that the share of the national GDP contributed by SMMEs comprises 36%. In addition, these enterprises employ just over 47% of the national workforce and account for more than 70% of the jobs in the country (Mundhree & Beharry-Ramraj, 2022).

As many participants highlighted, the damage to property from the looting left many businesses without premises from which to generate income. This affected the smaller retailers more than the larger ones who had reserves and comprehensive insurance. Smaller businesses had to access personal funds to try and restore their businesses (Mundhree & Beharry-Ramraj, 2022).

Moreover, the participants expressed that the industry has not yet fully recovered from the crises, with changes in shopper patterns being noted and reduced spend on luxury items. Interest rate hikes have further compounded the matter (Lepere, 2023).

In addition, since people were restricted from leaving their homes during various levels of lockdown, online shopping became more prevalent. Retailers thus either implemented online retailing strategies or increased their online presence to try and retain custom (Abe & Mugobo, 2021; Abe & Mugobo, 2021). As uncovered in the interviews, retail leasing has been affected as larger stores are reducing their retail shop sizes and opting for larger warehouse space (Creamer Media, 2022).

Working from home opened up opportunities for office tenants to relocate their businesses to their homes, causing vacancy levels in this area to spike dramatically. This affected property owners particularly since remote and hybrid working has grown, reducing the demand for office space. Even since the lifting of the lockdown and the return to full commercial activity, the expected return to the office has not unfolded. There is uncertainty whether occupancy rates will return to pre-pandemic levels (Lepere, 2023).

The implications of the impact that these crises have had on the commercial property sector support the significance of the sector to the economy and suggest future research opportunities surrounding the changes required in leasing strategies and use of office space to ensure sustainability for commercial landlords.

### **5.3. Balancing empathy and flexibility whilst ensuring business continuity**

This theme addressed the third research question, namely the role that leadership played in fostering employee engagement during these crises in the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal. The leaders expressed the challenge of balancing empathy and flexibility with the responsibility of maintaining output and business continuity.

Leaders have responsibility and accountability to the organisation in terms of achieving organisational objectives and to the workers in their care (Saji, 2014). In times of crises, the impact of leadership decisions and effects of their actions are even more significant since the crisis situation could threaten the organisation's survival (Balasubramanian & Fernandes, 2022).

In as much as the leaders expressed the importance of ensuring business continuity in servicing their clients and the communities, the importance of staff wellbeing from a physical, mental, and emotional perspective remained a top priority. In this regard, the leaders ensured that their teams had the necessary resources to carry out their tasks and set direction to guide their teams accordingly (Ahmed, et al., 2020; Chanana & Sangeeta, 2021). However, they also encouraged staff to rest or take care of family responsibilities as required.

Notably, most of the leaders emphasised that their teams were supportive and did their best in the circumstances. This suggests good relations between the leaders and their subordinates, which is an important foundation of employee engagement. It can thus be argued that the employees felt psychologically safe due to the culture of trust emanating from supportive leadership conduct (Saji, 2014; Saks & Gruman, 2014). In addition, supportive leaders create supportive followers (Balasubramanian & Fernandes, 2022)

Balasubramanian and Fernandes (2022) offer that it is imperative that leaders listen to employees' concerns during crises and give staff practical and psychological support. To this end, the organisation facilitated mental health and emotional support sessions to combat isolation and help staff deal with fears and pressure arising from the crises. Interactive sessions were designed to create participation and meaningful connections during times of lockdown. The social, relational element of work creates a sense of belonging, necessary for employee engagement (de Klerk, Joubert & Mosca, 2021).

During the looting and the flooding, the organisational leaders arranged for staff to receive essential supplies and access to water. The leadership thus demonstrated compassion and care for their team members, which engendered loyalty and commitment (Balasubramanian & Fernandes, 2022). This employee-centric approach enhances employee engagement by providing psychological meaningfulness, showing that staff are valued and appreciated (Saks & Gruman, 2014; Grant, 2019; Ahmed, et al., 2020).

#### **5.4. Expectations and pressure during these challenging times**

The second research question concerning how employee engagement was affected by the crises in the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal was addressed as described below.

The increased workloads emanating from additional reporting, rental remissions, liaison with tenants and landlords and ensuring Covid-19 compliance as the country shifted through various levels of lockdown, caused additional pressure for leaders and their teams. The looting brought similar pressure in increased administrative burdens and operational challenges. Most of the leaders stated that their teams stepped up when needed, putting in extra effort and assisting where possible. This finding is supported by Saji's (2014) stance that employee engagement in times of crises is even more important. Workers who possess high levels of engagement are innovative and creative and display extra-role behaviour (Rahmadani, et al., 2020; Decuypere & Schaufeli, 2020).

The leaders expressed challenges with employee engagement mainly with regard to remote working. These ranged from managing output where there were constraints with workers who had to take care of children, to staff who were actively disengaged. While remote working has been lauded as improving productivity and engagement, the enforced lockdown brought negative consequences such as reduced teamwork and collaboration in day-to-day activities. This is because the extended mandatory work from home requirement during the pandemic coupled with restriction of social interaction brought about feelings of isolation and reduced meaningful social connection. Research suggests that extended working from home, can in fact be demotivating and lead to decreased levels of engagement (de Klerk, et al., 2021).

Most of the participants expressed that the expectation on them as leaders was immense and, in some instances, they felt unsupported. This finding opens up an area for future research regarding the effects of crises on leaders. Even though leaders are expected to carry out their tasks under

extremely stressful circumstances whilst trying to reduce the pressures on their teams (Balasubramanian & Fernandes, 2022), they are human.

The following finding contributed to answering the third research question concerning the role that leaders play in fostering employee engagement in times of crisis. Some participants felt that leadership weaknesses were exposed during the crises. This ties into existing scholarship views that positive leadership styles enhance employee engagement (Popli & Rizvi, 2016; Grant, 2019) and corroborates that leadership in times of crises is critical (Balasubramanian & Fernandes, 2022). The significant implication here is that employee engagement is intrinsically linked to leadership which denotes the importance of the employee-employer relationship. Relationships take time to develop and as highlighted in the findings, leaders that did not have strong relationships with their teams struggled with leading remotely and motivating their teams. This is supported by Lazim et al. (2020) and Tao et al. (2022) who advocate that leaders need to take measures to boost morale and enhance motivation particularly in challenging times, where employee engagement is put to the test.

### **5.5. Increased collaboration and teamwork**

While leaders expressed that extended remote work during Covid-19 created feelings of isolation and reduced collaboration, most participants felt that the looming enhanced teamwork and collaboration. This is arguably from lessons learned from navigating the pandemic where for instance there was a lack of cohesion in developing standardised reporting for rent remissions. Participants referred to how, prior to the crises, teams operated in silos.

Participants expressed that there was collaboration with internal and external stakeholders. In addition, team members did not need to be directed to help where needed. This ties in with Balasubramanian and Fernandes' (2022) view that navigating the challenges of complex crises needs a collective approach. The authors advocate that leaders need to seek information, guidance, and assistance from internal and external sources. In keeping with the tenets of situational leadership, this encourages leaders to establish the individual strengths of team members and use these for maximum benefit (Balasubramanian & Fernandes, 2022).

### **5.6. Communication is key**

During times of crisis, communication is a fundamental, critical tool that forms part of the main responsibilities of leaders. Communication in these difficult times must be honest, transparent,

and frequent (Balasubramanian & Fernandes, 2022). The importance of open, honest, and constant communication came out very strongly in the findings. This was viewed not only as an important leadership tool to foster employee engagement but also as a critical driver of employee engagement.

Some of the leaders expressed that there was a lot of pressure on them to “have all the answers” as their teams looked to them for guidance. Balasubramanian and Fernandes (2022) advocate that leaders should be direct and factual, stating the reality of the current situation even when they themselves are uncertain. It creates what the authors term a sense of “us-ness” (Balasubramanian & Fernandes, 2022, p. 6), that the leaders and their teams are facing the storms together, which ties in with the importance of collaboration. This engenders trust, an integral component of relationships and employee engagement (Kewalramani, 2022). Moreover, open, transparent communication helps to allay anxiety, shows the employees exactly what the organisation is doing and what is expected of them.

The use of various ways of communication including WhatsApp groups, cell phone communication, Microsoft Teams, Zoom and emails, as well as formulating neighbourhood groups demonstrates that the organisation made every effort to ensure that communication was possible. The company facilitated internet access for their staff and linked personal cell phones to the company switchboard to ensure all staff could be reached and could reach out for assistance.

### **5.7. The role of leadership in fostering employee engagement during times of crisis**

The reviewed literature confirms that employee engagement is fundamental to organisational success (Saji, 2014; Grant, 2019; Ahmed, et al., 2020; Decuypere & Schaufeli, 2020; Gallup Incorporated, 2023). Crisis leadership has also been studied with scholars advocating that leaders need to demonstrate agility and flexibility by adopting a contingency approach (Balasubramanian & Fernandes, 2022).

The foundational pillar of employee engagement as highlighted in the findings is the relationship between the leaders and their teams. This supports the rationale of the social exchange theory for the conceptual framework that underpins this study. This relationship drives the interaction between the leaders and their teams and can be directly attributed to the level of support and commitment that employees are willing to provide (Saks & Gruman, 2014; Kewalramani, 2022). This is supported by Grant (2019) who states that leaders can alter the direction of the organisation

by employing strategies to enhance employee engagement. Relationships need time to develop. This suggests that leaders need to ensure a positive relationship with their teams as a foundation for employee engagement and this needs to be in place before trying to motivate and guide teams through crises.

While existing research emphasises the impact of employee engagement for organisational success (Wellins, et al., 2005; Saji, 2014; Decuyper & Schaufeli, 2020), organisational survival becomes the key objective during times of crisis (Saji, 2014; Lazim, et al., 2020; Balasubramanian & Fernandes, 2022). To this end, leaders must display adaptive behaviour, respond, and act decisively, whilst demonstrating resilience and courage (Balasubramanian & Fernandes, 2022). These elements point to ensuring business continuity (organisational survival) which is not possible without the support of engaged teams (Saji, 2014). Engaged teams are formed through positive employer/employee relationships (Grant, 2019). Figure 5-1 below demonstrates firstly the significance of the employer/employee relationship as the foundation for employee engagement. Leaders need to foster engagement by demonstrating compassion and care (Balasubramanian & Fernandes, 2022) as portrayed in Figure 5-1 below. The findings demonstrated that the leaders in the organisation under research prioritised employee well-being and offered support. This can be regarded as one of the roles that leaders need to play to foster engagement during times of crises.

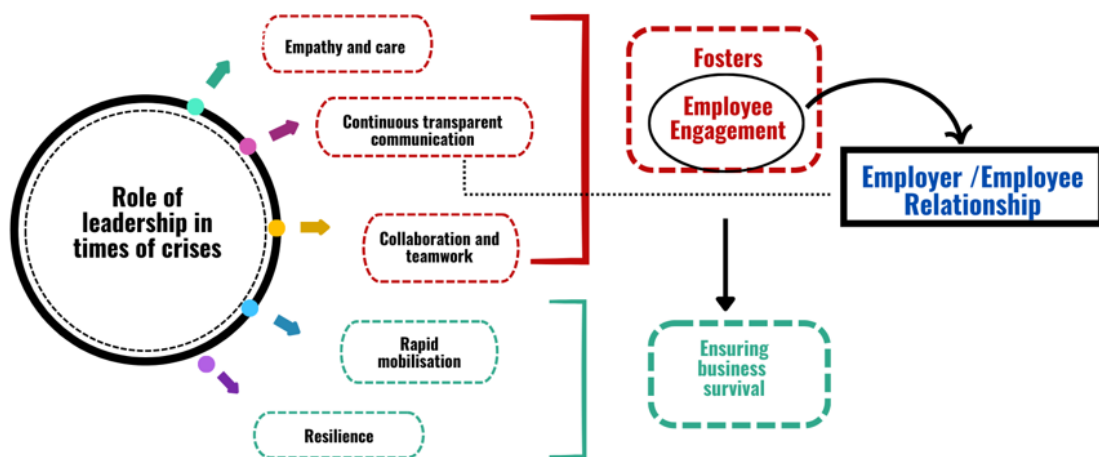


Figure 5-1: The role of leadership in fostering employee engagement in times of crisis

(Source: Constructed by researcher)

Communication emerged as a fundamental factor not only during times of crisis but as central to employee engagement. This too, can be related to the calibre of the employer/employee relationship and leadership style, which in itself points to the organisational culture (Saks &

Gruman, 2014; Grant, 2019; Gallup Incorporated, 2023). The dotted line from the second block (continuous transparent communication) to the foundational element of the employer/employee relationship in Figure 5-1 demonstrates this.

Leaders also need to foster a collaborative environment to develop creative solutions to complex problems. Collaboration suggests that leaders value their staff input which creates a sense of psychological meaningfulness, necessary for employee engagement (Saks & Gruman, 2014; Decuyper & Schaufeli, 2020; Rahmadani, et al., 2020). Collaboration and teamwork lead to stronger teams, whilst allowing for individual strengths across teams to be used to mitigate the threats posed by the crises and develop strategies in this regard for any potential future crises (Grant, 2019; Balasubramanian & Fernandes, 2022). Strong, engaged teams are arguably a prerequisite for crisis management (Saji, 2014)

Essentially, therefore, the role of leadership in fostering employee engagement during times of crisis is to demonstrate compassion and care, ensure open and honest communication, and encourage collaboration, which will empower teams. This, together with adaptive leadership that demonstrates decisiveness, resilience and courage will help keep the organisation afloat during times of crises (Balasubramanian & Fernandes, 2022).

## **5.8. Summary**

This chapter aligned the findings from the interviews with the research questions and existing literature. The role of leadership in fostering employee engagement during times of crisis was provided in the form of a model that is underpinned by the quality of the relations that leaders have with their teams. Ultimately leaders set the direction, provide the resources, and create the organisational culture, which influences how engaged employees are.

The next and final chapter sets out the conclusion and recommendations emanating from the findings and discussion carried out in this and the preceding chapter.

## **CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **6.1. Introduction**

The previous chapter presented a discussion of the findings that emerged from the data gathered from interviewing leaders in the property management company under research about leadership and employee engagement in times of crisis. The findings were aligned to existing literature and the research questions.

This chapter provides the conclusions and recommendations of the study in line with the findings and discussion of the previous chapters. In addition, confirmation that the research objectives have been met will be provided. The limitations of the study and recommendations for future research will be explored.

This study sought to uncover the role of leadership in fostering employee engagement in the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal given the significance of the property industry, as highlighted in the introductory section of this dissertation, and the importance of employee engagement for organisational success.

The Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns severely disrupted the commercial property sector, causing economic hardship through business closures, job losses, and unpaid rent. The civil unrest and looting in July 2021 further exacerbated these issues. These unprecedented crises posed immense challenges for organisational leaders to ensure business continuity while supporting stressed employees and confronting their own fears.

The crises highlighted the importance of flexible, empathetic leadership focused on employee well-being. Leaders arranged practical support through the provision of essential supplies for their staff when stores were left empty after the looting. Mental and physical health of employees was prioritised. Frequent, open communication was viewed as the cornerstone of employee engagement during the turmoil.

Expectations on leaders intensified. While some felt senior executives were detached, supportive leadership at other levels helped guide the teams. Collaboration increased, strengthening relationships and teams, who forged a united front to problem-solve and pool resources amid the unprecedented chaos.

The findings ultimately suggest that the role of leaders in fostering employee engagement during crises is to offer compassionate and caring leadership, take decisive action, empower their teams, foster collaboration, and maintain transparent and honest communication. The employer-employee relationship itself is the foundation as it is this relationship that sets the tone for engagement.

## **6.2. Addressing the research objectives**

The objectives of this study were to:

- Determine how the crises affected the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal.
- Examine how employee engagement was affected by the crises in the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal.
- Identify the role that leadership plays in fostering employee engagement during times of crises in the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal.

### **6.2.1. The effect of the crises on the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal**

The findings revealed that the Covid-19 pandemic and civil unrest caused severe economic disruption to the commercial property sector. Small businesses, which are an instrumental contributor to the country's GDP were the most affected. The impact was devastating overall, and the sector has not yet fully recovered.

### **6.2.2. The effect of the crises on employee engagement in the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal**

The unprecedented chaos meant leaders had to navigate uncharted territory to support worried, distracted employees whilst still ensuring organisational objectives were met. Remote work isolation during the hard lockdown period negatively impacted engagement but the organisation employed interactive, fun virtual sessions to mitigate the loss of connectivity. Most teams rallied, displaying extra effort. The leaders as employees felt that the expectation and additional pressure was immense and at times, they felt unsupported. Communication and compassion were viewed as critical drivers of employee engagement.

### **6.2.3. The role of leadership in fostering employee engagement during times of crises in the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal**

Figure 5-1 in Chapter 5 encapsulates the role of leadership in fostering employee engagement during times of crises in the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal. During the crises, the leaders had to balance empathy and compassion with ensuring business continuity. To this end, they had to reach out to their team and provide mental and emotional support. Workloads were reassigned to accommodate challenges with home schooling and other family responsibilities. Leaders had to ensure that there was continuous communication with their teams.

An emergent fundamental finding is that of the employer / employee relationship. The quality of this relationship impacts on the level of employee engagement. The leaders expressed how their teams rallied around to assist where possible. This suggests high levels of engagement that stems from strong relationships.

### **6.3. Limitations of the study**

This study adopted a case study approach with leaders in only one property management company being interviewed about their perceptions of the role that leadership plays in fostering employee engagement during times of crises in the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal. In addition, this study centred around leadership perspectives only. Given that this is a qualitative study, the findings cannot be generalised.

### **6.4. Recommendations for future research**

The severe disruption caused to the commercial property sector highlights its importance to the economy and raises questions about ensuring the sustainability of commercial landlords in the future. Further research could explore changes needed in areas like leasing strategies and office space use to support the viability of this significant industry over the long term.

As mentioned in the limitations of the study, only the perspectives of leaders in a property management company were obtained. Including the perspectives of their subordinates may provide a direction for additional research where the perceptions can be compared for a holistic view.

The effect of crises on leaders is another area that could be investigated. This is because most of the participants expressed that the expectation on them as leaders was immense and there was a lack of support from the upper echelons of the organisation. Leaders, in as much as they need to display resilience and courage and steer the organisation through the crises, are also employees. However, the level of compassion and support displayed by the leaders in the organisation under research to those in their care was not reciprocated. The proposed model depicting the role of leadership in fostering employee engagement during times of crises (Figure 5-1) could also present a point of departure for future research.

## **6.5. Summary**

This qualitative study explored the role of leadership in fostering employee engagement in the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal during recent major crises - namely the Covid-19 pandemic, the civil unrest and looting, and flooding,

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 11 experienced leaders of a property management company. Thematic analysis uncovered the crises' severe impacts on the sector and businesses within it. Findings showed supportive, empathetic leadership focused on employee well-being was essential to maintain engagement amidst the chaos.

Open, frequent communication was established as the cornerstone of engagement. Collaborative efforts also emerged to problem-solve unprecedented challenges. However, positive employer-employee relationships were found necessary to drive the elements of psychological meaningfulness, psychological safety, and psychological availability that engender employee engagement.

The research highlights the importance of adaptive, caring crisis leadership to drive employee engagement, which is critical for organisational resilience and survival. Overall, the study adds to existing scholarship on leading engagement in crises. It confirms that relationships and communication are key and that leaders have an important role to play in forming engaged teams.

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## **ANNEXURE A: INFORMED CONSENT**

### **INFORMATION SHEET AND INFORMED CONSENT**

To whom it may concern

My name is Jacqueline Grant from the University of KwaZulu-Natal's Graduate School of Business. I am currently pursuing a Masters of Commerce in Leadership degree at the institution.

You are being invited to consider participating in a study that involves the role of leadership in fostering employee engagement during times of crises (such as Covid-19, the July 2021 unrest, and the floods in April 2022) in the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal. The aim and purpose of this research is to identify the role that leadership plays in fostering employee engagement during times of crises in the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal of crises. The study is expected to enrol twelve (12) participants from your organisation.

The study will involve an in-depth one-on-one interview via Zoom or Microsoft Teams where you will be asked questions relating to employee engagement during crises and your role as a leader during those times. The duration of your participation, if you choose to enrol and remain in the study, is expected to be no more than two hours (this includes finalising this informed consent form and the actual interview itself, which should not take more than forty-five to sixty minutes). The study is self-funded.

There is no risk associated to your participation in this study as anonymity is guaranteed. Your name will not be mentioned anywhere in the research report. We hope that the study will create awareness of the role that leaders have in fostering engagement especially in such a vital industry. The property sector is a significant contributor to South Africa's GDP.

This study has been ethically reviewed and approved by the UKZN Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (approval number HSSREC/00005544/2023).

In the event of any problems or concerns/questions you may contact the researcher at [891107249@stu.ukzn.ac.za](mailto:891107249@stu.ukzn.ac.za) or via [REDACTED] or the UKZN Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, contact details as follows:

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Please be advised that participation in this research is voluntary. You may withdraw participation at any point. In the event of refusal/withdrawal of participation, you will not incur any penalties or lose any benefits to which you are normally entitled. Should you decide to withdraw, kindly email me at [891107249@stu.ukzn.ac.za](mailto:891107249@stu.ukzn.ac.za) as soon as possible so that I have time to source another participant to ensure there is sufficient data for analysis. Should the study be terminated for any reason, your participation will automatically cease.

There is no reimbursement for your participation in the study nor are you expected to incur any costs.

All information including your personal information will be kept strictly confidential. All transcripts and recordings of interviews, emails, and any other correspondence will be saved in the secure vault in my OneDrive folder. This is password protected and only my supervisor, Professor Cecile Gerwel Proches, and I will have access to the information. Any hard copy documents will be shredded, and electronic copies will be deleted from the OneDrive folder after the required storage time as per the university's policy has lapsed.

Kindly indicate your willingness to participate in the research study by completing and signing the section below.

Yours faithfully

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JACQUELINE GRANT

[REDACTED]

[891107249@stu.ukzn.ac.za](mailto:891107249@stu.ukzn.ac.za)



## **ANNEXURE B: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE**

The role of leadership in fostering employee engagement during times of crises: A case of the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal

1. Please confirm your age and role in the organisation
2. How did the Covid-19 pandemic, looting and floods, affect the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal?
3. How did leadership in the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal respond to the multiple crises?
4. What is your understanding of employee engagement?
5. How did the multiple crises affect employee engagement in the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal?
6. What challenges were experienced with respect to how leadership handled employee engagement during the multiple crises in the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal?
7. How did leadership foster employee engagement during the multiple crises in the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal?
8. With respect to potential future crises, what recommendations do you have for how leadership could better handle employee engagement?
9. Is there anything else that you would like to add?

## ANNEXURE C: ETHICAL CLEARANCE



08 April 2024

Jacqueline Grant (891107249)  
Grad School of Bus & Leadership  
Westville Campus

Dear J Grant,

Protocol reference number: HSSREC/00005544/2023  
Project title: The role of leadership in fostering employee engagement during times of crises: A case of the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal  
Amended title: An examination of the role of leadership in fostering employee engagement during times of crises: A case study of the commercial property sector in KwaZulu-Natal  
Degree: Masters

### Approval Notification – Amendment Application

This letter serves to notify you that your application and request for an amendment received on 26 March 2024 has now been approved as follows:

- Change in title

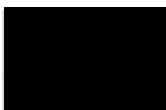
Any alterations to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form; Title of the Project, Location of the Study must be reviewed and approved through an amendment /modification prior to its implementation. In case you have further queries, please quote the above reference number.

PLEASE NOTE: Research data should be securely stored in the discipline/department for a period of 5 years.

HSSREC is registered with the South African National Health Research Ethics Council (REC-040414-040).

Best wishes for the successful completion of your research protocol.

Yours faithfully



.....  
Professor Dipane Hlalele (Chair)

/dd

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Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee  
UKZN Research Ethics Office Westville Campus, Govan Mbeki Building  
Postal Address: Private Bag X54001, Durban 4000  
Tel: +27 31 260 8350 / 4557 / 3587  
Website: <http://research.ukzn.ac.za/Research-Ethics/>

Founding Campuses: ■ Edgewood ■ Howard College ■ Medical School ■ Pietermaritzburg ■ Westville

**INSPIRING GREATNESS**

## ANNEXURE D: CODING

Themes	Categories	Codes
Severe disruption to the property industry	Unprecedented catastrophic events	Devastating, never seen before
		Unheard of; never been through something like this before
		Looting more disastrous than Covid
	Business closures	Complete destruction - nothing to come back to
	Unchartered territory	Fear of unknown
	Economic implications	Trade is not restored
		Less disposable income; paying debt
		Change in shopper patterns
		Businesses can operate from home
		Cannot afford luxuries
	Loss of trade	Building damages - customers shopping elsewhere
	Rapid mobilisation	Remote work
		Covid compliance; permits, signage
Educating tenants		
Balancing empathy and flexibility whilst ensuring business continuity	Prioritised staff wellbeing	Encouraged to rest
		Safety of staff more important than anything else
		Facilitated food, supplies and water during looting and flooding
	Understanding of constraints	Additional support for junior staff
		Redistributed workload as far as possible
	Balancing family and work responsibilities	Work-life balance
		Juggling personal and work obligations
		Illness
		Childcare
		Home schooling
	Mental and emotional support	Mental health and safety
		Interactive, fun sessions to combat isolation
		Offered assistance, counselling, online workshops

Themes	Categories	Codes
Expectations and pressure during these challenging times	Amplified demands	Added reporting responsibilities during Covid and looting
		Taking on work where subordinates could not
		Own family life suffered
	Difficulties surrounding remote work	Breakdown of relationships
		Online meetings - unable to pick up non-verbal cues
		Affects company culture
	Quality of relationships before crises affects engagement	Non-operational / not close to staff
		Relationships built over time
	Expectations from clients / management outside the province	Lack of support from C Suite during looting
		Incredibly long hours
Increased collaboration and teamwork	Banded together through common struggles	Collaboration across teams and externally
		Breakdown of silos
		Assisted outside of own area
		Pooling of resources
		Assisted outside of own area
	Teams became closer	Strengthened team relationships
		Identified individual strengths
Communication is key	Fundamental requirement for engagement	Open and frequent communication
		2-way street
	Creativity	Thinking out the box; new ways to communicate
	Continuous communication and feedback	Constant check ins
		Stay close to teams
		Know your people
	Communication channels and infrastructure	Tools and resources to facilitate communication
		WhatsApp Groups /Teams/Zoom