

Adaptive leadership in local responses to COVID-19: Cases of the cities of Santa Rosa and Valenzuela, Philippines

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ABSTRACT. The Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) created a disruption to the global landscape that called for the quick response of key governance actors, specifically an adaptive approach by the local leaders. In this study, we analyze strategies of two local chief executives to draw insights about how adaptive leadership practiced in the context of two cities in the Philippines deemed to excel in managing the pandemic at the height of its onslaught. Owing to COVID restrictions at the time of the study, secondary data from various social media accounts, local government portals, and news websites were utilized together with the accounts from a university webinar in which the mayors presented their leadership experiences. The data were analyzed using Mulder's four dimensions of adaptive leadership. Findings show that during a pandemic, leadership may deviate from a traditional to an innovative, adaptive form. The study documents the various strategies employed by the mayors, from which other local chief executives in similar crisis response and management contexts may draw leadership and governance insights. This article is a preliminary inquiry on adaptive leadership in local governance seeking to invite further discourse on the role of adaptive leadership in an increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous world.

Keywords: *Adaptive leadership, COVID-19, local government, pandemic, Philippines*

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INTRODUCTION

The Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) pandemic has shaken communities globally bringing about a massive public health crisis and concerns about a looming economic slump. It called for the urgent response of key governance actors in mitigating the impacts of disruptions to lives and livelihoods. Months into the pandemic, prospects for the *new normal* pervaded discussions in all sectors and levels of society, with the government at the helm. Current exigencies at the time already compelled the public sector to move toward an adaptive governance approach (Janssen & van der Voort, 2020).

Adaptive governance is defined as “a range of interactions between actors, networks, organizations, and institutions emerging in pursuit of a desired state for social-ecological systems” (Chaffin et al., 2014, p. 6). It involves continuous learning, engagement of stakeholders in decision making, and self-organization of the governance system (Rijke et al., 2012). Rijke et al. further note that to strategically bring together people, resources, and knowledge in such adaptive processes, leadership is crucial. In complex and uncertain crises such as the current pandemic, adaptive leadership is deemed essential (Ramalingam et al., 2020; Roberts, 2020).

The pandemic is constantly evolving, with leaders facing unpredictability, imperfect information, multiple unknowns, and the need to identify responses quickly – all while recognizing the multi-dimensional (health-related, economic, social, political, cultural) nature of the crisis. Indeed, the pandemic experience has been a real-life case study wherein the pros and cons of every option that is available had to be weighed carefully. The coronavirus pandemic was new to the world, and none was fully prepared when it came. While some lessons learned from prior outbreaks and other crises can serve as useful guideposts on what can be done, the coronavirus pandemic has been constantly evolving, bringing multiple unknowns across different dimensions – social, political, cultural and others. It has also posed an unprecedented challenge to science, policy, and the interface between the two. To address issues related to the pandemic, leaders have been drawing on their wisdom and gut feeling in providing interventions while learning and adjusting in real time. The pandemic represented an adaptive problem, requiring policy makers as well as leaders to respond, experiment, and develop strategies, all with urgency. How policymakers have responded to the changes brought by the pandemic can be recorded as a reflection of an adaptive leadership approach where leaders continually learn and continually adjust to their responses as necessary.

Drawing from the adaptive leadership framework, the authors analyzed the selected city mayors' strategies to draw insights around how the Covid-19 crisis context tipped local government leadership toward the adaptive form. The study is focused on the Philippines, which had the greatest number of positive COVID-19 cases in all of Southeast Asia as of August 31, 2020 [World Health Organization (WHO), 2020].

This paper investigates the extent to which adaptive leadership is demonstrated in the context of local governments and teases a possible future research trajectory for adaptive leadership in local public governance. Attention is focused on interactions between the mayors, their constituencies, and non-profit actors at the local level. While there are aspects of the leadership dynamics that could be further enlightened by analysis of interactions with upper levels of government and other public agencies, those are beyond the purview of the paper.

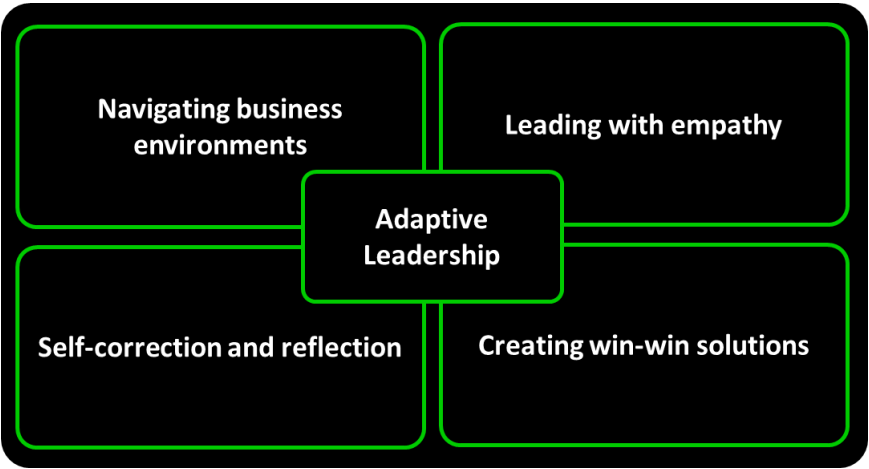
Research Framework

Discourse on adaptive leadership could be traced back to Heifetz and Linsky (2002). A later work (Heifetz et al., 2009) presented the concept as a theory. They defined adaptive leadership as "the practice of mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges and thrive" (p. 26). The adaptive leadership model is molded to guide various organizations and individuals in dealing with changes in uncertain times (Heifetz & Linsky, 2017).

Adaptive leadership challenges can be distinguished from technical challenges. Technical challenge is one for which a solution is already known, i.e., the knowledge and capacity exist to solve the problem. Meeting a technical challenge is not necessarily simple, nor should the results be presumed trivial. Learning to remove a person's appendix is a remarkable feat. It may be hard to do, but by now, an established and proven procedure exists to gradually teach someone how to do it. There are many cases where technical expertise will suffice. However, in a world that is constantly changing, disruptive (or even exponentially at that), or where a variety of options exist that seem equally valid, or in an environment where one has no idea about the correct thing to do or the next step to take, one has to learn and practice adaptive leadership (Codrington, 2020). Adaptive problems or challenges, on the other hand, are difficult to identify and might be easy to deny. People often refuse the existence of the adaptive challenge. Adaptive challenges often cross organizational and disciplinary boundaries and require systems thinking. Solutions often require innovation, new discoveries, and experiments and may take a long time to be implemented.

The adaptive leader designs interventions based on observations in response to adaptive challenges and fosters processes that give way to new norms that further improve adaptive capacities (Heifetz et al., 2009). From this developing stream of thinking, Mulder (2023) organizes adaptive leadership in terms of four dimensions (Figure 1). The first dimension is navigating the new environment, which in this study, the authors investigate as navigation of the governance environment and the leader’s adoption of new approaches in embracing uncertainties. The second dimension, leading with empathy, is examined with reference to how any sense of shared purpose is created and how management is done through influence. The adaptive leader is characterized to have a good understanding of alternative perspectives, embrace diversity, and can empathize with their stakeholders and colleagues. The third dimension, learning through self-correction, is considered in how new rewards are aligned with experimentation leading to success. Under the current pandemic, the adaptive leader detects, filters, and decodes signals to anticipate and respond to change. For the last dimension, creating win-win solutions, observation is focused on how sustainable success for stakeholders and an enabling environment for collaboration are realized.

Figure 1
Four dimensions of adaptive leadership (Mulder, 2023)



METHODOLOGY

Case Cities

Two cases are presented in this article: those of Mayor Arlene Arcillas of the City of Santa Rosa and Valenzuela City Mayor, Rexlon Ting (Rex) Gatchalian. These mayors were chosen based on their comparable contexts as industrializing communities along the margins of Metropolitan Manila, Valenzuela being within the northern boundary and Santa Rosa as immediately adjacent to the southern end.

Santa Rosa is a city in the province of Laguna with a population of about 414,812 constituting 12.6% of the total population of the province [Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA), 2020]. The city includes major residential, commercial, and industrial center in the South Luzon Region having special economic zones and industrial parks. The city also registered a revenue of 4.4B PHP in 2020 (Commission on Audit, 2020).

Valenzuela is one of the cities under the National Capital Region with a population of 714,978 (PSA, 2020). The city is regarded as the *Northern Gateway to Metropolitan Manila* due to two major highways traversing it. Food, metal, plastic, and textile industries can also be found in the city contributing to its economic growth. Based on the reports, the city has a revenue of 5B PhP in 2020 (Commission on Audit, 2020).

Both cities are commercial hubs with companies, business establishments, and manufacturing plants employing workers coming from other localities and provinces. Management of COVID-19 in these areas are both complex as movement of people and cargo has had to be stringently monitored and controlled. Despite these, the two mayors have innovated strategies including policies and ordinances since the early part of the pandemic.

Method of Analysis

The study embarked on secondary data analysis following O'Leary (2017). Transcripts of a recent university online seminar, official government websites, news articles, and social media posts by the local and national media entities were the main sources of information due to the limitations to primary data access arising from the pandemic during the research period. Mulder's four dimensions was applied in the sorting of relevant themes around the extent of adaptive leadership practice at the local government level.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Mayors' Profile

Santa Rosa City is headed by Mayor Arlene B. Arcillas, who hails from a family of politicians. Her political career started in the 1980s when she served as part of the *Kabataang Barangay Federation*. She then became a senior city councilor in 2004, and assumed the position of city vice mayor in 2005. She ran for office and won as mayor in 2007. After 9 years as incumbent, she ran and won a seat in Congress for the lone district of Santa Rosa where she served for one term and later made two successful bids for mayor in 2019 and 2022. Mayor Arcillas holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Biology from the University of the Philippines Los Baños.

At the time of the study, Valenzuela City was being overseen by Mayor Rex Gatchalian who likewise hails from a family of politicians. His political career started in 2007 as a representative of the first district of Valenzuela. He became the mayor in 2013, where he served up to the maximum term limit after two successful re-election bids. In 2022, he ran uncontested for a seat in Congress to represent the lone district of Valenzuela but had to give up the post after the newly elected President appointed him as Secretary of Social Welfare and Development. Mr. Gatchalian holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Political Science from George Washington University in the USA.

Ordinances Implemented in Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

On 23 January 2020, the WHO made a pronouncement that all countries must be prepared to detect, isolate, and contain the spread of the then Novel Coronavirus (nCoV) infection. At the time, there was no recorded case in the country. By 30 January, the first case of nCoV infection (COVID-19) was recorded. On 7 March, the first local transmission was reported, alerting the public and the government. Mayors in Metro Manila including Valenzuela City were called upon to respond as most of the cases reported were in their areas. Not long after, the virus spread to other provinces. By 16 March, the first case of COVID-19 in Santa Rosa City, Laguna was recorded.

President Rodrigo Duterte declared a national public health emergency on 8 March, and by 25 March, Republic Act No. 11469 or the Bayanihan to Heal as One Act was enacted. The legislation provided the President additional authority to steer the country's response to the

COVID-19 pandemic. Under Proclamation No. 922, all local government units (LGUs) and government agencies were mandated to implement urgent measures to contain the effects and impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic (Presidential Communications Office, 2020). The presidential directive was a pragmatic approach to the universal dilemma. Emergencies (natural disasters and epidemics of smaller scale) faced by the local government on a regular basis call for technical responses such as the issuance of legislations and utilization of emergency response funds (approximately 5% of the local annual budget). The current situation, however, called for a mix of technical and adaptive approaches. Mayors in this study candidly depicted the situation as a matter of having to address the situation *on their own*. In the university webinar of the Center for Strategic Planning and Policy Studies (CSPPS, 2020) titled, *Strategies employed by leading LGUs in managing the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic*, Mayor Arcillas asserted, “No one can help us... It is us in the city who can help ourselves...,” while Mayor Gatchalian talked about having to “take the bull by the horn... and find a solution on our own.”

The Inter-Agency Task Force (IATF) adopted a national government enabled, LGU-led, people-centered response to the pandemic (IATF Resolution No. 25). LGUs were placed in the frontline to lead the fight against COVID-19. Even before this announcement, some LGUs had already been preparing for battle. Mayor Gatchalian met with stakeholders from schools, hospitals, and other institutions to ensure that they knew what they were up against to effectively craft their plan of actions. According to him, it was important for the LGUs to understand their role to uphold the necessary precautions that must be taken for the people’s health and safety.

LGUs were given the freedom to decide the courses of action to contain and mitigate the impacts of the pandemic. In the case of Valenzuela, Mayor Gatchalian passed an ordinance against kite-flying as there were reports about power outages caused by kites flown by many home-bound residents. On the other hand, Mayor Arcillas had to deal with the prevalent use of fake quarantine passes and incidences of ordinance violations.

There were instances, however, whereby mayors engaged in policy learning such as the case of mobile *palengke* (market on wheels), an innovation by another city government. Policy learning was evident in the ordinances passed by different LGUs: staying at home, wearing masks, observing alternative work arrangement, and staying sober. Aside from these, they also followed similar guidelines for movement under Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ), Modified Enhanced Community

Quarantine (MECQ), and General Community Quarantine (GCQ) which were the different levels of community quarantine regimes imposed by the national government. The most restrictive among the three was the ECQ while the least restrictive was the GCQ. Other ordinances, policies, and ordinances by Valenzuela and Santa Rosa are shown and summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

List of policies enacted in response to the COVID-19 pandemic

Ordinance	Valenzuela	Santa Rosa
Anti-hoarding ordinance	Ordinance No. 669, s. 2020; March 12, 2020 This ordinance limits the number of items to be sold per person per day to prevent panic-buying.	–
Stay-at-home ordinance	Ordinance No. 670, s. 2020; March 16, 2020 This ordinance imposes restrictions on unnecessary travel to prevent the further spread of the virus.	Executive Order No. 12, s. 2020; March 18, 2020 This pertains to the implementation of ECQ in the City of Sta. Rosa.
Ordinance requiring the adoption and implementation of physical distancing and other precautionary measures to prevent and contain transmission of COVID-19	Ordinance No. 673, s. 2020; March 16, 2020 This ordinance requires establishments including schools, offices, and hospitals to follow strict measures such as physical distancing to prevent the transmission of COVID-19.	Executive Order No. 12, s. 2020; March 18, 2020 This pertains to the implementation of ECQ in the City of Sta. Rosa.
Price freeze on basic commodities	Executive Order No. 010, s. 2020 (SRP of face masks) This ordinance protects members of the community against the practice of putting a high premium on basic commodities such as face masks.	Executive Order No. 13, s. 2020; March 19, 2020 This EO pertains to putting a price freeze on basic commodities.

Table 1 (continued)

List of policies enacted in response to the COVID-19 pandemic

Ordinance	Valenzuela	Santa Rosa
Creation of a contact tracing team and implementation of guidelines for the conduct of expanded testing procedures for COVID-19	–	Executive Order No. 14, s. 2020
Management of the dead and the missing	–	Executive Order No. 15, s. 2020
Implementation of precautionary measures to prevent the transmission of COVID-19 in all establishments	Executive Order No. 2020-056; March 16, 2020 This EO requires all establishments to follow precautionary measures to prevent COVID-19 transmission.	–
Immediate temporary closure of all courts, halls, clubhouses of all homeowners' association or private subdivisions	Executive Order No. 2020-057; March 16, 2020	–
Restricting minors and students from entering computer rental shops, arcades, and gambling lounges	Executive Order No. 2020-058; March 16, 2020	–
Cancellation of all mass weddings	Executive Order No. 2020-059; March 16, 2020	–
Mandating the immediate closure of all city parks, barangay-operated basketball courts, 3S function rooms, gatherings, meetings, etc.	Executive Order No. 2020-061; March 16, 2020	–

Table 1 (continued)*List of policies enacted in response to the COVID-19 pandemic*

Ordinance	Valenzuela	Santa Rosa
Implementing the temporary restriction on all forms of gambling activities	Executive Order No. 2020-062; March 16, 2020	–
Implementing the temporary suspension of the franchise to operate the cockpit arena of Sanal Amusement Corporation	Executive Order No. 2020-063; March 16, 2020	–
Implementation of extended ECQ	–	Executive Order No. 16, s. 2020
Re-organizing the local task force against COVID-19	–	Executive Order No. 17, s. 2020
Alternative work arrangement ordinance	Ordinance No. 676, s. 2020; March 23, 2020 This ordinance is also known as the “Alternative Work Arrangement Ordinance”. This pertains to the option to implement a work from home or skeletal workforce setup for all Contract of Service and Job Order workers in the City Government of Valenzuela during the ECQ.	CSC Memorandum No. 10, s. 2020 The City of Sta. Rosa implemented CSC Memorandum No. 10, s. 2020 or the Revised Interim Guidelines for Alternative Work Arrangements and Support Mechanisms for Workers in the Government.
Stay sober ordinance/ Liquor ban	Ordinance No. 681, s. 2020; March 23, 2020	Ordinance No. 2142-2020; May 3, 2020
Wear your face mask ordinance	Ordinance No. 687, s. 2020; April 7, 2020	Ordinance No. 2139-2020; April 15, 2020
Anti-discrimination ordinance	Ordinance No. 600, s. 2020; April 6, 2020	Ordinance No. 2140-2020; April 27, 2020

Table 1 (continued)

List of policies enacted in response to the COVID-19 pandemic

Ordinance	Valenzuela	Santa Rosa
Imposition of an administrative penalty of Php 5,000 or rendering of community service to violators	Ordinance No. 692, s. 2020; April 20, 2020	—
An ordinance setting the universal safety measures for Modified Enhanced Community Quarantine	Ordinance No. 697, s. 2020; May 16, 2020	Executive Order No. 18, s. 2020; May 2020
An ordinance setting the standards and protocols for health-related facilities, government, food service, and building offices during MECQ	Ordinances No. 698 - 701, s. 2020; May 16, 2020	Executive Order No. 18, s. 2020; May 2020
Ordinances establishing the health safety standards and protocols in public and private transport and terminal, commercial centers and similar establishments, construction workplace, and lodging facilities during the MECQ	Ordinances No. 702 - 705, s. 2020; May 16, 2020	Executive Order No. 18, s. 2020; May 2020
Prohibited business establishments during MECQ	Ordinance No. 706, s. 2020; May 16, 2020	Executive Order No. 18, s. 2020; May 2020
An ordinance setting the universal safety measures for General Community Quarantine	Ordinance No. 713, s. 2020; June 1, 2020	Section 4 of the Omnibus guidelines on the implementation of the Community Quarantine in the Philippines
Ordinances setting the standards and protocols for health-related facilities, government, food service, and building offices during GCQ	Ordinances No. 714 - 717, and 719, s. 2020; June 1, 2020	Section 4 of the Omnibus guidelines on the implementation of the Community Quarantine in the Philippines

Table 1 (continued)*List of policies enacted in response to the COVID-19 pandemic*

Ordinance	Valenzuela	Santa Rosa
Ordinances establishing the health safety standards and protocols in public and private transport and non-contact sports during the GCQ	Ordinances No. 720 - 722, s. 2020; June 1, 2020	Section 4 of the Omnibus guidelines on the implementation of the Community Quarantine in the Philippines
An ordinance allowing the operation of salon, barbershops, and parlors during GCQ	Ordinance No. 723, s. 2020; June 1, 2020	Section 4 of the Omnibus guidelines on the implementation of the Community Quarantine in the Philippines
Safety standards for accommodation and dine-in during GCQ	Ordinances No. 725 and 727, s. 2020; June 1, 2020	Section 4 of the Omnibus guidelines on the implementation of the Community Quarantine in the Philippines
Ordinance expanding the operation of salon, barbershops, and parlors during GCQ	Ordinance No. 730, s. 2020; July 6, 2020	Section 4 of the Omnibus guidelines on the implementation of the Community Quarantine in the Philippines
Health standards for religious gatherings	Ordinance No. 741, s. 2020; July 11, 2020	–
Mandatory quarantine of all household members and persons considered as close contact of active COVID-19 cases	Ordinance No. 742, s. 2020; July 17, 2020	–
Ordinance prohibiting those who are under 17 years old to go out of the house	Ordinance No. 745, s. 2020; July 29, 2020	–

Note. Compiled by the authors from various sources

It can be mentioned that since the beginning of the pandemic the cities of Santa Rosa and Valenzuela had already developed and enforced ordinances. Other responses of the cities, however, were based on the existing laws and policies mandated by the national government as reflected in Table 1.

Using Mulder's Four Dimensions of Adaptive Leadership

As the Special Envoy to the WHO Director-General on COVID-19 emphasized, adaptation to the pandemic was a leadership imperative. To realize this, certain enabling capacities for systems and entrepreneurial approaches were necessary (Ramalingan et al., 2020). As such, building leadership vision and a supportive management culture across teams and units coordinating the response is important. It comes with transparency about what is being learnt and when changes need to be put in place to remain on track toward the goal. Embracing a *whole-of-system* perspective is also necessary in calibrating interventions, as any change is deemed to have ripple effects or attendant disruptions on other elements of the governance system. Local engagement is also key for ideating appropriate solutions and ensuring cooperation toward desired behavior change. Lastly, a futures perspective empowers leadership to take on cross-temporal effects of current crisis response actions.

In a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic, local chief executives just like their counterparts in the corporate world rely on adaptive leadership skills. This is done to cultivate a similar adaptive governance condition that gives way to systematic solutions to complex dilemmas. Applying Mulder's (2023) framework to the context of local public governance, adaptive leadership qualities are observable among those who 1) cultivate diversity among various local governance actors to expand the portfolio of solutions; 2) lead with empathy toward all constituents; 3) embrace the processes of learning; and 4) create win-win solutions. These four dimensions guide the ensuing case comparison.

Navigating the Governance Environment

Stakeholder engagement intensifies the capacity of local government to contain the spread and mitigate impacts of the pandemic. In the cities of Santa Rosa and Valenzuela, this approach was evidenced by active partnership with national public agencies, the private sector, and non-government organizations (NGOs). The Inter-Agency Task Force (IATF) and Department of Health (DOH) provided national policy guidance while *barangay* (village) officials assisted in the monitoring of infection cases as well as in the targeting and delivery of aid to families. In

Santa Rosa, the city government reciprocated the local *barangay* partners by providing supplemental financial assistance on top of the financial aid it directly distributed to indigent households. In both cities, arrangements were made with the Overseas Workers Welfare Association (OWWA) for transportation and lodging assistance to returning overseas workers.

The mayors' offices highlighted the importance of the local councils' support through passing of critical ordinances. The mayors were in close coordination with the city medical teams and private hospitals to assess the progress of infections. Some of the more relevant partnerships with the private sector included the setting up of testing laboratories and isolation facilities.

When it came to coordination with the private sector, both city governments reached out to industries regarding monitoring of employees that tested positive to COVID-19. In the case of the Valenzuela city government, there was an effort to incentivize cooperative behavior by recognizing top taxpayers and job providers. At the same time, collaboration was also pursued with a micro lending facility that specializes in providing credit for working capital. Partnerships with companies, *JoyRide* and *Happy Move PH* were also linked to facilitate alternative employment for public conveyance drivers displaced by the lockdowns.

NGOs were engaged by the city governments for a wide range of initiatives. In Santa Rosa, supplemental relief goods and volunteer manpower for local checkpoints were received from NGOs. In Valenzuela City, Mayor Gatchalian acknowledged the city government's collaboration with foundations such as the Bantay Bata, Consuelo Foundation, and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) in coming up with stay-at-home modules that city government workers distribute to the citizens. He described the complementing relationship with NGOs in his webinar presentation as "...the LGU has the muscle or the logistical muscle but what we lack normally is the content," (CSPPS, 2020).

Leading with Empathy

Empathy enables leaders to strengthen relationships and inspire cooperation from constituents. For the local chief executive, one relationship that impacts governance effectiveness is with employees of the organization. The work-from-home arrangement was implemented in all government offices generally to limit viral transmission, but also in consideration of employee apprehensions about exposure risk and being able to keep their jobs. Both city governments provided free transportation to frontliners and essential workers. At the height of discrimination faced

by healthcare workers arising from fears of infection, both city governments passed ordinances prohibiting acts of bullying and cruelty against medical frontliners, COVID-19 patients, and persons suspected of being infected. Additionally, the Valenzuela City government provided housing for frontline workers and mounted a tribute program for them. Being industrial and commercial hubs, there are many people in both cities that work in other areas.

On the flip side, there are also many workers from other areas who work in Valenzuela and Santa Rosa. Mayor Gatchalian shared that when he realized that there were many Obando residents working at the Valenzuela Citicare Medical Center, Valenzuela City Emergency Hospital, Allied Care Experts Medical Center Valenzuela, and the DOH-run Valenzuela Medical Center, he welcomed them into the Obando Frontliner Center that served as their temporary shelter. In Santa Rosa City, donated goods were distributed to frontline workers of the local government and deadlines for processing of mandatory public employee forms like the Statement of Assets and Liabilities (SALN) were extended.

Quirk (2018) expects public sector leaders and workers to have a high sense of empathy. In the Philippines, citizens' desire for attachment is a cultural trait rather than an effect of rapid globalization. Be it Mayor Arcilla's consultation with communities to directly inquire of needs or concerns during the ECQ or Mayor Gatchalian's visit to seven jeepney terminals to inquire of the drivers' and operators' plans, local citizens placed value to face-to-face interactions with their local officials. For a fast-growing industrial city like Valenzuela where labor groups abound and the population continues to diversify, inter-faith dialogues and meetings with different labor union groups have served this end while also aiding the identification of food aid recipients.

Furthermore, leadership can explicitly promote empathy among organization members, as was the case when the Valenzuela Health Office conducted training for tracers. In the program, Mayor Gatchalian reminded contact tracers that, "This job needs a degree of emotion for you to be able to get the right information from the patients. Treat your patient as your family member. You should treat patients the way you want to be treated," (Maramag, 2020 para. 5).

From a public official's perspective, such interactions could be a means to project confidence of leadership in facing the challenges of the pandemic. Mayor Arcillas, for instance, shared in the university webinar by CSPPS (2020) about her effort to exude a positive attitude in her interactions with constituents, "I always say I feel relaxed in dealing with

the people. First of all, the mayor should be the one seen with a positive view of the situation... It is very important now more than anything that people be assured that everything will be okay. We are taking care of them." This facet of leadership, i.e., being able to communicate confidence and make good on their word to constituents, is deemed critical in times of crisis (Kettl, 2006).

Both mayors were keen in saying that they always checked on their constituents and asked for their recommendations on how to improve service provision. "*Kaya labanan ng Santa Rosa ang Corona*" (Santa Rosa can fight Corona) was the hashtag of the city even before it was placed under ECQ. It was a call-to-action for all stakeholders.

Empathy was evident in both governments' programs aim at alleviating impacts of the lockdown on vulnerable groups, displaced workers, consumers, and the business sector. Welfare programs were continued and financial assistance was expanded to senior citizens, persons with disabilities, and workers who lost their regular incomes. In Valenzuela, street dwellers were provided with housing to protect them from exposure to the virus. Food aid became universal in both cities as the local government recognized that the lockdown had affected people's livelihood. The city government of Santa Rosa declared a price freeze policy in local markets and a grace period for rent payments. As additional protection for consumers, the city government of Valenzuela passed the Anti-hoarding and Anti-panic Buying Ordinances (Ordinance No. 669, s. 2020). For the business sector, tax payment deadlines were extended and penalties and surcharges for late renewal and registration of small public utility vehicles were waived in Valenzuela.

Self-correction and Reflection

Adaptive leaders reflect on their own successes, failures, and limitations to further improve their strategies. They also ensure that they know what is going on around them, in particular the desires of their constituents, to ensure that their plans are relevant and impactful. Both city governments exhibited the practice of reflecting on the results of their previous strategies and acting upon the issues that occurred along the way.

Low-income communities were the priority of LGUs when the ECQ was announced. Upon the extension of the lockdown, Mayor Gatchalian felt the need to extend their assistance to middle class communities as well as non-resident workers who were stranded in the city. In one of his interviews with Rappler, he stated that, "We realized families from the middle class, especially the lower to middle class, were

starting to feel the pinch already. They were rummaging through their life savings already so we opted to include them in the food packs (Gavilan, 2020, para. 16)."

Likewise, the city government of Santa Rosa extended their help to teaching and non-teaching personnel of private schools as well as families residing in subdivisions when Mayor Arcillas realized that they, too, needed assistance. Given that many people were losing their jobs, Mayor Arcillas re-prioritized their programs. They discontinued projects that were of less importance, adjusted their budget, and prioritized sustaining the basic needs of the members of the community.

Also, when they realized that the government was focusing on giving financial assistance, Mayor Gatchalian moved on to being more *equitable* and just focused on providing food. To quote Mayor Gatchalian during the university webinar of CSPPS (2020), "Given that the national government is already spending by giving people cash subsidy, the local government decided that food on the table is our main objective. Nobody goes hungry, that is why we kept on focusing on food and nutrition, to provide food for every Valenzuelano family." In a Rappler article, a constituent shared, "Food packs are better than money since you really need to eat, for your family, and so more people will benefit," (Gavilan, 2020, para. 4).

The strategies that Mayor Gatchalian did were adaptive. He realized the gaps and he adjusted accordingly. Aside from these strategies, Mayor Gatchalian was vocal in saying that it is not bad to admit that one does not know the answer to everything. The pandemic was new to all and sometimes the best recourse was to experiment with, collaborate with, and listen for feedback and recommendations from other members of the community to know how to improve on the next steps.

Transparency is an important aspect of self-correction and reflection. It is also useful for managing the expectations and motivating self-reliance among the citizens. Mayor Arcillas also shared in the university webinar of CSPPS that making members of the community understand the problem at hand was one of her immediate priorities as local chief executive. She said that it is important for the people to know the limitations of support that may be available from the central government and their own capacities for self and mutual reliance.

Both LGUs utilized collaboration with the members of their community to determine their needs and to enhance their capabilities and capacities. As Mayor Arcillas mentioned in the university webinar by

CSPPS (2020), “Collaboration among stakeholders proved to be useful in this very unique time.” On the other hand, Mayor Gatchalian met with different labor union groups and grocery/supermarket owners to speed up the distribution of food packs. He also resorted to tagging of households for monitoring and use of vouchers to regulate the flow of people during distribution.

Upon realizing the need for expanded coverage and faster turnaround of results, Mayor Gatchalian partnered with The Medical City for the first localized COVID-19 testing in the country. Still not satisfied with the gap between their testing capacity and the demand for such, he partnered with three more laboratories to enhance their capacity. He also added 15 more trained personnel in the City Epidemiology and Surveillance Unit (CESU). Moving forward, Mayor Gatchalian considered the wealth of data currently being generated from the local tests as a promising source of information for anticipated decision making in the city government.

Aside from mass testing and isolation of cases, it was also deemed necessary to stop the spread of virus through the observance of safety protocols. One of the early efforts made by many local governments, including Santa Rosa City, was the installation of sanitation booths and misting facilities then surmised as effective in killing the virus. The Department of Health, however, later issued warnings about their inefficacy and possible harm to human health (Galvez, 2020). The city governments had since reconsidered this strategy.

In both cities, as in many parts of the country, ordinances requiring the wearing of face masks in public were enforced. It was observed by the two mayors, however, that there were people who violated the ordinances in their respective cities. Hence, the two mayors were forced to implement stricter guidelines. Monitoring was also enhanced for stricter implementation of the ordinances. Stricter protocols were also implemented not only for the members of the community but also for the government offices and buildings in the cities.

Creating Win-win Solutions

As both mayors acknowledged, it is critical not only to control the spread of the virus but also to mitigate its economic impact on households through the provision of basic food and health needs and economic opportunities. To reduce the spread of virus in the municipality while addressing the dietary needs of their constituents, the mayors took inspiration from Pasig Mayor Vico Sotto’s mobile *palengke* (market on

wheels). In Valenzuela City, Market on Wheels was implemented to bring basic commodities closer to people while also providing income to vendors and e-trike drivers. Done in partnership with e-trike drivers and the VALDECO Greenleaf Market – a local cooperative helping vendors through livelihood programs, this *borrowed* idea from Pasig was a convenient win-win solution. As Mayor Gatchalian said in a news interview, “Even in a non-pandemic time, I am not ashamed to say that you should try to co-opt good ideas, especially good government ideas. There is no exclusivity when it comes to good governance” (Gavilan, 2020, para. 32).

Another win-win solution observed was in Santa Rosa, where the distribution of *healthy* food packs composed of fresh produce from farmers in the northern regions and other parts of the province was implemented. Despite national government efforts to ease up the flow of goods from the provinces to the cities, the lockdowns had, nevertheless, disrupted the supply chain of farm products, to the detriment of small farmers’ livelihoods. Mayor Arcillas’ strategy to incorporate fruits and vegetables into the food aids augmented access of farmers to consumers while also promoting healthier diets among Santa Rosa constituents. Likewise, the City Agriculture Office has since promoted consumption of vegetables as they distributed free seeds for urban farming.

Mayor Gatchalian identified three main challenges that Valenzuela City encountered during the pandemic: the lack of national ID system or household databases in the country, the incongruence between DOH public pronouncements on testing and actual testing capacity, and the lack of DOH guidelines on isolation facilities and protocols on treatment of symptomatic and asymptomatic patients. In response to these challenges, Mayor Gatchalian proposed to make use of their existing community-based monitoring system data socio-economic maps, zoning maps, and actual house-to-house visits of *barangay* officials to effectively identify and quantify the target number of beneficiaries. Their next course of action was for the LGU of Valenzuela to take the lead in contact tracing, testing, and isolation facilities management but not limiting the efforts in the realm of the public sector. They decided to partner with private laboratories and in this regard, Valenzuela became the first to roll out localized mass testing in the country. Lastly, to further reduce and control the number of cases in Valenzuela, they took the lead in coming up with local protocols based on available data.

The pandemic response of the two city governments placed to the fore the utility of the e-government concept beyond the goal of efficiency. Automation in both city governments is currently fully operational, both to

enhance work efficiency and lessen risk of transmission. At the university seminar, Mayor Gatchalian was introduced as a pioneer at leveraging disruptive innovations, as the city government of Valenzuela is one of the first in the country to automate its business processes. Its online services system dubbed as *Paspas* (gust; *fast* in colloquial terms) Permit is the first to incorporate the application processes for *barangay* and business permits in one transaction. Valenzuela's *Paspas* Permit system mitigated lockdown-related delays in business registration in one of the busiest cities in Metro Manila. Likewise, the city of Santa Rosa implemented an online application system for travel passes during the ECQ as well as online business registration through the Negosyo (Business) Center of Santa Rosa. Indeed, the movement disruptions caused by the pandemic fast-tracked the realization of e-government as a critical component of the *new normal*.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The COVID-19 brought to light the utility of non-traditional and innovative approaches identified with adaptive leadership. With Proclamation No. 922, the city governments of Santa Rosa and Valenzuela, along with other LGUs in the country, took up the challenge of steering local response to an admittedly wicked problem. From the observations presented in this paper, the authors argue that while Kettl (2006) rightly asserts the necessity of leadership at a time of crisis, the adaptive nature of leadership offers bright prospects for cities in developing countries like the Philippines.

In this paper, instances of adaptive leadership in Santa Rosa and Valenzuela were unpacked using Mulder's (2023) Four Dimensions of Adaptive Leadership. Cataloguing of strategies indicate thoughtful and strategic stakeholder engagement, empathy to organizational members and citizens, continuing learning, and proclivity toward win-win solutions. In the case of Santa Rosa and Valenzuela, celebrated local responses have indicated a dominant adaptive leadership approach to the wicked problem that is the pandemic.

Immediate successes are lessons for effective practice in crisis response and management that could be shared to similar governance contexts. This, however, is only part of a developing discourse in the Philippine local governance landscape. Studies down the road would be vital to further understanding the role adaptive leadership plays in steering communities toward the *new normal*. Such studies can explore other leadership dynamics that were not covered in this study such as

intergovernmental relations in crisis management. In a broader sense, such understanding speaks beyond a pandemic, but rather to every shock that threatens to adversely disrupt citizens' ways of living. The COVID-19 pandemic created new opportunities for leadership and governance learning, and adaptive leadership scholarship in the Philippines and beyond.

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