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## Morphing Management Methods to Build Rapid Resiliency during Crisis

## **ABSTRACT**

The tourism industry was drastically impacted during the COVID-19 pandemic which caused managers to face uncertainty and unprecedented challenges. An interpretative case study of an international airline was conducted revealed rich insights and descriptive stories captured through interviews. A cross-interview analysis and iterative coding, inductively led to concept development. A new concept of Rapid Resiliency is distinguished from Organizational Resiliency based on the element of compressed time. Organizational Resiliency is a capacity built over time whereas Rapid Resiliency describes the building of resiliency quickly while living through the crisis experience. The model shows that pandemic driven environmental changes, including decreasing passenger demand, travel restrictions, and stringent health measures placed extraordinary pressure on the airline. Four propositions are presented describing management approaches that culminate to help organizations build resiliency swiftly during crisis.

**Keywords:** Tourism Resiliency, Organization Resiliency, Rapid Resiliency, Managing Uncertainty, Crisis Management

## **Morphing Management Methods to Build Rapid Resiliency during Crisis**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Aviation is a sensitive industry requiring carefully planned operations. Disruptions can represent significant financial, environmental, and social damage for tourism and trade (ICAO, 2022).

According to Budd et al. (2020), resiliency is increasingly important for the airline industry as major disruptions occur more frequently. In turbulent times, resiliency becomes essential particularly when the viability of airlines is threatened. The prolonged and unprecedented impact of the COVID-19 pandemic provided a new opportunity to extend knowledge on how to build resiliency quickly during crisis.

Building resiliency was extremely relevant during COVID-19 as organizations struggled through the pandemic (Gossling et al., 2020). In general, resiliency has been viewed as an evolutionary process rather than a revolutionary one. A need exists for a model exhibiting how organizations can build resiliency rapidly during crisis. This research aims to understand how an international airline accomplished this using the real-world context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The line of inquiry explores how airline managers changed approaches and expediently built resiliency. A new concept of Rapid Resiliency (RR) introduces a phenomenon emerging as Organizational Resilience (OR) builds rapidly in the moment as the organization lives and learns during a crisis. As environmental disruptions can arise from natural disasters, economic events, and political turmoil (Ererdi et al., 2022), it is important for organizations to learn how to develop the skills and knowledge to weather such storms.

The following research questions were explored to provide a broader range of insights on how to build RR: How do companies navigate and build resilience during crisis? What conditions foster

RR during crisis? What management approaches are effective in building RR?

This research adopts a definition of OR from Chen et al. (2021), who describes it as the ability of an organization to reallocate resources, optimize processes, and reshape organizational relationships in a crisis, to survive and hopefully thrive by building a stronger more resilient organization. It is proposed that crisis conditions can stimulate the rapid building of resiliency in organizations. The need to survive galvanizes an organization to collectively pivot and transform, thereby enabling organizational learning and resiliency building. This study provides managers with crisis approaches based on both managing uncertainty theory and OR theory.

This research makes contributions to the theory and practice of OR by proposing a new concept of RR distinguished from OR. Case study outcomes emerge from data analysis culminating into four propositions of management approaches that help to build RR. Each proposition is then described separately, supported by real world examples from an international airline. A model of RR is presented showing how threats can be drivers that stimulate the need for change and how managers can morph their methods to help build resiliency in the moment.

On the practical side, new insights are provided on how an airline developed RR and managed through crisis; allowing the company to emerge renewed and equipped with greater resiliency to weather future disruptions.

This paper is structured as follows: theoretical background is presented, then the research methodology, followed by the findings, proposition building and discussion of managerial and research implications, conclusions and suggestions for future research.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

## **Managing uncertainty through crisis**

During change, the management challenge is comprehending the nature of the change and the potential impacts on the company. In times of revolutionary change boundaries are blurred, rules become irrelevant and understanding the implications of revolutionary change can be as difficult as anticipating the change itself (Wayland, 2015). Understanding drivers of change affecting fundamental parts of an industry requires a different kind of knowledge from a decision maker's prior experience (Vecchiato, 2012). Scanning and determining if the change will drive a fundamental shift in the industry itself is also important when considering alternatives. According to Watkins and Yaziji (2020), crisis can create longer term opportunities and threats as the internal and external landscape of organizations shifts rapidly. These findings suggest that managing uncertainty requires heightened abilities to scan, assess and determine new pathways forward in volatile environments, further complicated by unknowns and changing conditions.

As environmental scanning is critical for leaders to monitor changes, Brown and Kline (2020) suggest that previous pandemics and crisis "should have been a wake-up call for management to be more attentive" in preparing for exogenous shocks (p.8). As suggested by Vecchiato (2012), anticipating the causes of change can help to prepare for change. Crisis interrupts routine decision-making processes and consequently, management teams with different expertise need to come together to integrate disparate information, understand the change, deliberate, and ultimately make better decisions (Thürmer et al., 2020). Using collective if-then plans can promote cooperative and collaborative behaviors as teams collectively aim towards goal setting priorities quickly; with a focus on the common good (Thürmer et al., 2015). By adopting and regulating team behavior during crisis using collect if-then plans, teams learn from each other and

resiliency emerges (Thürmer et al., 2020). During the pandemic, comprehensive contingency plans were tested as unprecedented cash and cost crises impacted airlines worldwide (Budd et al., 2020). The magnitude, complexity, and disregard for geographic or functional boundaries challenged the sufficiency of contingencies.

The unknown nature of the next disturbance poses challenges to planning and training (Boin et al., 2010) and thus resiliency capacity of an organization is increasingly important to survive shocks. According to Boin et al. (2010), “a resilient organization scans its environment, monitors impending changes, and rolls with the punches” (p. 8). As disruption is commonplace in the industry, airlines must prepare for shocks and build resiliency capacity to cope (Budd et al., 2020).

Human Resource Management (HRM) can make a significant contribution during crisis through strategies, practices, capability building, and employee relations responses that must continuously evolve as the level of impact and intensity of crisis changes (Farndale et al., 2019; Rivera-Prieto et al., 2022). “Environmental disruptions can impact ‘employees’ well-being as they deplete employees’ physical and emotional resources” (Kim et al., 2022, p. 285). Employee perceptions that organizational support is genuine, help to neutralize negative impacts on employees. HRM should provide well-being supports for individuals and encourage managers to be more compassionate, transparent, and open to sharing information during crisis (Kim et al., 2022). Developing capabilities that enable organizations to be supportive, flexible, and adaptable to change is important to managing transitions and HRM can greatly assist in these endeavours.

To avoid inertia and analysis paralysis in times of environmental change, airlines must strategically innovate, adapt, and emerge successfully from crisis (Gudmundsson et al., 2021). Companies should encourage innovation and versatility given that “with the speed of changes

survival is now considered a critical aspect of business and being resilient is important for such survival” (Ruiz-Martin et al., 2018, p. 11). Generating ultrafast innovation involves grasping the innovation problem, reallocating resources, using emerging technologies, encouraging collaboration, and integrating end users (Von Krogh et al., 2020). Strategic resilience can be defined by the velocity and consistency in which innovation leads to metamorphosis (Moraes-Storz et al., 2018). To achieve this companies should create a culture of resilience and openness to innovation.

As presented by Gopalakrishnan and Misra (2021), innovation during crisis emerges either as a reactive response to contain problems that arise from a threat or proactive innovation that addresses new needs and embraces opportunities. As an example, COVID-19 posed economic, social, and health threats that drove reactive innovation such as designing new solutions to keep customers and employees safe in response to heightened hygiene and health regulations. Crisis can also stimulate learning, creativity, and ingenuity as resources concentrate on sharing ideas, integrative thinking, and leveraging technology to address emerging needs. The invention of new service models can emerge during crisis (Heinonen & Strandvik, 2021), ignited by a sharpened, proactive focus on innovation to capitalize on new opportunities (Gopalakrishnan & Misra, 2021).

Regardless of whether driven by reactive or proactive reasons, it seems that stimulating innovation is strategic and key to survival. It is important to create an environment that facilitates organizational ability to pivot quickly to understand the problems, allocate resources, leverage technology, and orchestrate collaboratively. This enables an organization to both respond to imminent threats and proactively embrace opportunities to innovate and transform.

Although managing in uncertain times has been a prevalent topic of interest in business



management literature, the dynamic and multi-faceted implications of complicated challenges faced by managers today warrants further investigation (Williams et al., 2017). Through this research, the insights gained from managers leading through the COVID-19 pandemic and the propositions presented should help to inform managers of new approaches to consider during uncertainty.

### **Organizational Resiliency**

Resiliency is a complex concept with many different perspectives to explore. As proposed by March (1991), a company's survival is dependent upon its ability to reconfigure resources to capture existing and emerging opportunities; in response to a disruption followed by a return to its normal state after the event. In later studies, OR encompassed an organization's ability to emerge from a crisis, strengthened and more resourceful (Vogus & Sutcliffe, 2007). OR can have positive implications beyond crisis as "resilience can also be viewed beyond restoration to include the development of new capabilities and expanded ability" (Lengnick-Hall et al., 2011, p. 244). This suggests that resiliency develops over time by managing stress and extenuating circumstances, and that these experiences help to prepare and shape future responses.

Developmental studies explored resiliency from an organizational capability and capacity perspective. As described by Ruiz-Martin et al. (2018), resilience is a combination of an organization's abilities, characteristics, capacities, and capabilities to deal with disturbances. Others suggested resilience as a dynamic and flexible organizational capacity developed over time and derived from adaptive, coping, and learning capabilities in response to crisis (Gittell et al., 2006; Ma et al., 2018). A developmental perspective contemplates both success and failure, as lessons learned foster coping skills that give rise to new organizational capabilities and capacities over time (Sutcliffe & Vogus, 2003).

According to Luthans et al. (2005), resiliency can be developed as a positive psychological capability to rebound from adversity or positive change. As identified during COVID-19 Waters et al. (2022), outlined several positive psychology factors to support people through the pandemic such as providing meaning, high quality connections, and positive interpersonal processes.

Human and social resilience references protective factors such as assets, resources, or qualities of people that can strengthen resilience and lessen potential impacts. Overall, individuals will be more likely to succeed when they have access to resources, training, positive support, and experiences to draw from that promote self-efficacy and competence. As individuals are provided with knowledge and given the freedom to solve problems and make decisions during adversity, they develop competence and a sense of efficacy that enables them to persevere when facing challenges (Sutcliffe & Vogus, 2003). In organizations, integrating members with varied knowledge, expertise, and experiences builds collective knowledge and efficacy fostered by a shared belief in their joint capabilities to act and attain goals, thereby reinforcing resiliency.

An interesting question raised by Boin et al. (2010), addressed whether resiliency relates only to one-time severe events or to a wider range of disruptions and disturbances. As resiliency is a capacity to adjust and adapt positively to adversity while attaining positive outcomes, it could be drawn upon to handle and persevere through various challenges. According to Ranucci and Wang (2024), top management teams' ability to remain future-focused during a crisis can positively influence an organization's performance and recovery. Exploring how organizations build resiliency capacity to proactively manage change should be valuable in an ever-changing world.

The "moment" of resilience is posed by Boin et al. (2010), to question when resilience is most important. A later study by Williams et al. (2017), states that if resilience is the outcome of disruption, then it would occur after the event and if considered a process, then resilience would

occur earlier. Expanding further on this Williams et al. (2017), propose that people use their capabilities to interact with the environment, which enables positive adjustment prior to, during and following adversity.

A perspective of resilience timing is explored in this paper which introduces a new concept of building resiliency rapidly in the moment of crisis while living through the experience.

Resiliency theory and managing uncertainty theory are combined to propose that managing change under uncertain conditions can stimulate building resiliency rapidly rather than gradually.

The need to survive creates a sense of urgency that galvanizes an organization to collectively pivot and transform while living and learning through the experience.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Qualitative Research using an Interpretivist Paradigm**

Qualitative research produces rich, contextual, and descriptive data by engaging in conversations with research participants in their environments (Cresswell et al., 2007). Qualitative research is well suited for exploratory studies seeking to answer ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions making it applicable for this research. An interpretivist paradigm emphasizes that social reality is created through shared interactions as knowledge is gained through understanding and interpretation (Koivu & Damman, 2015). Interpretivism is appropriate for understanding individual’s interpretations and how they socially construct, perceive, and make sense of their company’s approaches. An exploration of local meanings and understandings generates persuasive narratives revealing rich insights.

A holistic approach to inductive concept development captures the human organizational experience providing meaning to both the individuals involved and the researcher (Gioia et al.,

2013). This approach allows for the presentation of participant's stories interwoven with researcher's interpretations as the researcher gains insights (Cresswell et al., 2007). The goal of theory building in the interpretative paradigm is to generate descriptions, insights, explanations, and meaning as the structuring and organizing processes are revealed (Gioia & Pitre, 1990). Theory building is inductive "with existing theories about structuring processes accounted for late in the theory building process to prevent biases toward existing theories" (Gioia & Pitre, 1990, p. 588). Exploratory case studies start with a descriptive framework rather than developing from a prior literature review (Ponelis, 2015). In this exploratory study, the literature review occurred after the theory building process. Essentially it all came together in the end with the introduction of the new concept of RR. This model addresses a literature gap caused by the limited understanding of how management behaviors can build resiliency during the moments of crisis.

### **Case Study Research Design**

A case study design is used to investigate a phenomenon in a real-world context (Yin, 2018). When research is highly exploratory, a single case study is useful to familiarize the researcher with phenomenon within its context (Benbasat et al., 1987). In this research, a case study approach is appropriate given the focus on a current event, the COVID-19 crisis, where control over the subject or event is not possible and there is limited theoretical knowledge of the phenomena under investigation (Benbasat et al., 1987).

Case studies provide an intensive, holistic description and analysis within a specific context that is important to providing insight into real life situations (Yin, 2018). A case study examines a phenomenon in its natural context with a purpose to understand the uniqueness, complexity and interactions of the phenomena (Leppäaho et al., 2016). A case study is best suited for this

exploration, as this research is seeking to understand how individuals construct meaning to phenomena during an event (Gioia & Petri, 1990). By conducting this case study of Air Canada during the COVID-19 pandemic, significant insights were revealed as managers openly shared their perceptions of the impacts and managerial implications of the event.

### **Case Selection**

Given the extensive airline industry experience of one author, personal networks were used to connect with Air Canada management. Participation in the study was based on access to Air Canada managerial roles performing pandemic driven activities. Snowball sampling technique occurred through conversations with interviewees.

Many interview participants were from the Operation Excellence team who reported under the structure of the Vice President of Operations. The team normally supported innovation initiatives and data analytics with efforts mainly focused across three areas: Maintenance, Planning and Airports Customer Experience. During COVID-19, this team was actively engaged with innovation projects and activities making the team an interesting focal point for this study. Product Design & Customer Insight, Cabin Services & Standards, Human Resources, and Information Technology managers were also interviewed.

### **Data Collection**

The primary data source was interviews conducted with managers to uncover perceptions of how resiliency was built during COVID-19. A semi-structured, one on one online interview, with open-ended questions enabled interviewees to speak freely, revealing deeper insights. Questions explored managerial perceptions of challenges, opportunities, approaches, and actions related to the company's resiliency building activities. This data was triangulated with secondary data

sources including corporate documents and press articles as outlined in Supplementary Table I.

Given Canadian COVID-19 lockdown restrictions, email was used for scheduling sessions and Zoom was used for conducting and recording interviews. The researchers made thorough interview notes and documented observations. Interviews and data collection occurred between June and July 2021. Table 1 provides interviewee details based on fourteen interviews conducted with Air Canada management employees. The average interview lasted 80 minutes, corresponding to 1,118 minutes of audio recording. Interviewees validated findings in May and June 2022.

## **INSERT TABLE 1**

### **Data Analysis**

A cross-interview analysis compared results from each interview to identify similarities and differences leading to development of key themes and constructs (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). During the analysis phase, inductive discovery started by coding and synthesizing interview data. A multitude of first order categories were created as meaningful patterns emerged. The next step was to organize first order codes into second order constructs. An iterative analytical process of recoding and identifying conjectures about organizational structuring processes occurred. Review of representative quotes underlying second order concepts provided rich context. Distillation of second order codes resulted in overarching aggregate dimensions and subsequently propositions emerged.

The results were then compared against company documents and press articles to allow for triangulation of data. Matching data from different data types, source times, and time periods support the development of more robust theoretical concepts and causal relations increasing the

validity and accuracy of the findings (Jick, 1979). A literature review revealed existing theories and models to support the development of substantive theory (Gioia & Petri, 1990). Research skills were important to capture the context and richness of data and present a clear chain of evidence (Benbasat et al., 1987). Narratives and descriptors provided meaning for manager's lived experiences.

## **Research Context**

According to UNWTO (2020), the world faced an unprecedented global health and economic crisis during the COVID-19 pandemic, devastating the tourism industry. The impacts were substantial with “demand disappearing virtually overnight and revenue reductions threatening the viability of companies” (Gossling et al., 2020, p. 2). Many airlines reduced capacity, canceled flights, and contracted schedules (Kaffash & Khezrimotlagh, 2023).

Air Canada is Canada's largest airline providing scheduled passenger services in the Canadian market. In 2019, it was amongst the top twenty largest international airlines in the world (Air Canada, 2021). In December 2019, viral outbreaks emerged in China. Asia routes were cancelled causing an excess of available aircraft capacity. This proved to be an early sign of what was yet to come. As infections spread globally, the airline's operating activity, revenues, and cashflows plummeted. Air Canada reduced international traffic substantially, rationalized domestic flying, and grounded its low-cost carrier.

## **INSERT TABLE 2**

As shown in Table 2, Air Canada experienced significant declines reducing the fleet by 14 percent and average daily scheduled flights by 64 percent in 2020 compared to 2019. Air Canada attributed declines to sustained negative impact on passenger demand given the continued

perceived risk of infection. Throughout 2020 and 2021, Canada prohibited most inbound travel by non-Canadians and imposed a quarantine on Canadians returning from abroad.

Air Canada reduced Available Seat Miles (ASM) capacity by 67 percent in 2020 compared to 2019 (Air Canada, 2021). As stated, “the airline will continue to dynamically adjust capacity and take other measures as required to adjust for demand as a result of health warnings, travel restrictions, quarantines, border closures, and market and regulatory conditions” (Air Canada, 2021). The company continued, “Air Canada concluded a series of financing transactions in 2020, totalling \$6.78 billion USD to support the implementation of its planned mitigation and recovery measures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and provide it with additional operational flexibility” (Air Canada, 2021).

From the onset, the aviation sector continued to face severe drops in traffic, revenue, and cashflow. 2022 forecasts remained 20 to 30 percent lower than 2019 (ICAO, 2022). Even though loss mitigation was a focus, Air Canada seized opportunities to transform.

## **FINDINGS**

Our findings, derived from the interviews, company reports, and press releases, reveal four aggregate dimensions that contribute to building RR. Supplementary Table II contains interviewee quotes that substantiate the dimensions.

An aggregate dimension of renewed vision and emergent strategy is proposed with four second order codes derived inductively. Unified purpose, clear direction, pivoted mindset, and elevated customer expectations reveal changes required when building RR.

Five second order codes were identified including resource planning, flexible organizational structures, talent management, culture of caring, and resource sharing. The aggregate dimension



of innovative HRM emerged.

Four other second order codes arose including organizational alignment, collaborative problem solving, creative thinking, and living the experience culminated in the aggregate dimension of integrated solutioning.

The aggregate dimension of cultivate innovation encompassed encourage risk taking and experimentation, create innovative environments, and cease innovation opportunities.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Comparison of Rapid Resilience (RR) and Organizational Resilience (OR)**

The impact of COVID-19 created an unprecedented magnitude and pace of change driving the need for RR at Air Canada. RR is a new concept defining the swift development of resiliency through the fusion of multiple organizational actions occurring simultaneously in a rapid manner. RR is essential when survival is under threat and organizations are forced to act urgently, under extraordinary conditions, in response to disruptions.

RR can be distinguished from OR based on the time horizon within which resiliency is formed. Primarily RR arises during situations of unanticipated change often spurred by environmental threats. The intense demand for change requires immediate action and resiliency is needed in the moment to navigate the transition. The time available to scan, plan, and respond requires an extreme ability to adapt and ignite immediate action to pivot the organization forward. Quickly integrating people who openly share perspectives and cross-pollinate ideas sparks instantaneous growth and learning. As described by Williams et al. (2017), a firm should “establish organizing

practices in the moment to be able to improvise and craft what is needed, when it's needed, despite not previously anticipating it was needed" (p. 747). This acceleration of energy and action stimulates ultrafast innovation. The urgent imperative to change can swiftly drive organizational and business model transformations. These experiences build resiliency rapidly in the moment as people learn and grow, giving rise to new coping skills and capacity to manage future challenges.

RR contrasts to OR with respect to the element of time as shown in Table 3.

### **INSERT TABLE 3**

In the case of RR, there is an urgent need for resiliency and limited time available to develop said resiliency. In comparison OR develops in a more evolutionary manner when there is more time to prepare for, assess, and plan actions. As stated by Gittel et al. (2006), resilience builds over one's career as a capacity to deal with stressors and disruptions. This evolutionary concept of OR is further substantiated by Lengnick-Hall and Beck (2005), who state that resiliency develops over a longer period of time. In general, more time permits organizations to build resiliency gradually and in a purposeful and planful manner. This provides organizations with a progressively higher tolerance, increased capacity to accept change and the ability to weather storms. As shown in Table 4, organizations have more time to set vision and provide direction, develop HRM strategies, identify and solve problems and plan innovations.

### **INSERT TABLE 4**

In the case of Air Canada, facing rapid and continuous change while managing through crisis helped the airline build coping skills and resiliency capacity in the moment it was needed. As described by (Director1), "*Rapid Resilience describes what we experienced. We did not have time to think.*" Determining a new vision and direction occurred rapidly; with new strategies emerging

as conditions changed. HRM programs were introduced quickly to support employee well-being and necessary structural adjustments. Integrative problem solving occurred by focusing on clear intention and openness and by incorporating alternative perspectives and pathways. Risk taking and experimentation were encouraged, spawning creativity and instantaneous innovation. It is proposed that RR emerged simultaneously as the airline swiftly transformed during crisis thereby strengthening capacity and capabilities to face future challenges.

### **Rapid Resilience (RR) Model**

As shown in Figure 1, threats arising through crisis cause uncertainty as companies attempt to understand the nature, impact, and magnitude of the situation, and how to address the implications. Using COVID-19 as an example Gopalakrishnan and Misra (2021), describe these threats as economic, social, and health related. They had significant consequences on consumer demand, government regulations, and health measures. Depending on the crisis event, threats may vary and should be considered drivers of change as they signal an organization to scan and make sense of the situation in order to take appropriate action (Wayland, 2015).

The extent that organizations have resilience to cope during adversity is becoming increasingly important in a dynamic world of complex and rapid change (Sutcliffe & Vogus, 2003).

Understanding management approaches that ignite resiliency can help to strengthen the capacity to cope.

The model illustrates that the first step is to create a renewed vision and emergent strategy. When faced with threats, organizations intensify sensing and scanning to calibrate their environments (Mithani & Kocoglu, 2020). A continuous collection of insights guides emergent strategies, and frequent communication reinforces the vision and direction. The next step is to manage and

deploy resources both internally and externally using innovative HRM practices and structures including leveraging relationships and partnerships to respond to threats. Encouraging collective problem solving facilitates organizational learning as employees learn from each other and gain new insights and perspectives that foster creative ideas and robust decision making. To capitalize on these ideas, innovation is accelerated as employees are encouraged to experiment and take more risks. When this model is continuously applied expediently during disruptions, RR is built as learning is ignited in the moment that people live the experience.

In summary, our analysis indicates that four aggregate dimensions culminate in management approaches that build RR, outlined as follows:

1. Renewed Vision and Emergent Strategy
2. Innovative Human Resource Management
3. Integrated Solutioning and Organizational Learning
4. Cultivate Innovation

**Proposition 1 (P1).** *Instilling a renewed vision and emergent strategy is paramount for RR.*

During the pandemic drastically changing circumstances required a renewed vision and emergent strategy. This was achieved by creating a unified purpose, setting clear direction, adopting a pivoted mindset, and addressing elevated customer expectations. By exploring the drivers of change, a company can align an anticipatory approach with the conditions of uncertainty faced (Vecchiato, 2012).

### **Unified Purpose**

It was critical for leadership to articulate a shared view of the future on how to move forward under the new circumstances. “*The commercial airline is dependent on passenger booking*

*patterns. With each wave of the pandemic, layoff worries rise fueling the insecurities people have about job security”* (Director1). As employees experienced uncomfortable feelings fueled by uncertainty and insecurity; thoughts concerning the organization’s survival arose, causing stress, anxiety, and confusion. Air Canada’s renewed vision guided employees by orienting them through unfamiliar landscape. This provided a clear sense of purpose, *“to build and sustain organizational resiliency the company needs to build a common view of recovery”* (Director3). As shown by Ranucci and Wang (2024), if Top Management Teams have a collective future focus, this favorably impacts their company’s ability to be resilient and reduces performance loss during crisis. It was essential that management provided reassurance and guidance as employees tried to get their bearings.

### **Set Clear Direction**

Uncertainty drove the airline to stretch beyond existing business strategies (Heinonen & Strandvik, 2021). *“The company stopped flying certain aircraft types altogether. It was like a reverse workflow of trying to get aircraft out of the system rather than into the system as per normal operations”* (Manager1). *“Decreasing aircraft capacity and adopting more cost-efficient aircraft types was key”* (Manager 6). As described by Mithani and Kocoglu (2020), it is important to engage in hypervigilance for extraordinary events, with engagement and commitment of managerial attention on developing plans and the quick deployment of resources to enact response routines. At Air Canada, environmental dynamics drove emergent strategies that were adapted, refined, and repositioned. Direction was set and clearly articulated as *“leaders kept a positive momentum going. Messaging emphasized that we are going to get through this and there is light at the end of a very long tunnel”* (Director4). Transparency was essential so *“leaders were forthright about what’s happened, their long-term plan and outlook”* (Director2).

*“We are bonded by a mutual goal to get the airline back on its feet. There is a lot of buy-in and a very collaborative and engaged group of people who want to work together”* (Manager2).

Management felt that employees bonded together, rising above and beyond to weather drastic changes with a united purpose.

As stated by (Director1), *“the company can build and sustain organizational resiliency through leadership with a strong vision to unify everyone around the same goals. A vision needs to allow everyone to recognize themselves in that vision”* and help *“employees understand why change was necessary and important. There was clear direction to scale back pre-pandemic activities and reprioritize projects”* (Manager7). Leadership became more accessible and visible during crisis while re-instilling confidence, re-focusing, and reassuring employees of the way forward.

### **Pivoted Mindset**

Managing uncertainty requires continual quick scanning and making sense of the changing landscape (Thürmer et al., 2020). Shifting perspectives help to create new mental models that can help to overcome adversity (Mithani et al., 2021). At Air Canada, assessing the situation required a strategic shift, *“a quick pivot explored new questions driven by changing government regulations and increased health and hygiene standards. The situation required a complete shift in mindset and approach. A pivoted mindset emerged with a focus on keeping passengers traveling and reinforcing that travel was safe”* (Director4). A more holistic approach materialized, focused on anticipating and meeting customer needs with a greater concern for both customer and employee well-being. By relaxing organizational boundaries, companies may notice anomalies and identify potential options that transcend normal limits (Wayland, 2015). *“People are thinking outside of the box. Crystal balling is happening as everyone tries to understand what could happen in the future”* (Director5). As it was deemed critical for the airline

to ensure that a passenger's first travel experience was favourable post pandemic, a new mindset emerged focused, on understanding changing customer needs.

### **Elevated Customer Expectations**

Customer expectations rose due to the fear of viral spread. At Air Canada, a *“rethinking of assumptions and strategy was required to elevate the customer experience through rapid innovation”* (Manager2). Priorities shifted to address heightened hygienic measures, demand for distancing and touchless services. Providing relevant information to help customers understand and navigate pandemic documentation and travel requirements was paramount. The key task during uncertainty is to identify the new value chain and constituents of the business (Vecchiato, 2012).

Guided by mutual goals and new direction, employees experienced a mindset shift as they sought to map out a new customer experience. As these transitional moments were lived, the capabilities and capacity to manage through change grew. As stated by Lengnick-Hall et al. (2011), “resilient firms actually thrive and become better in part because they faced and overcame serious challenges” (p. 243). Managers felt that resiliency capacity was developed quickly while living through the crisis. For Air Canada, a renewed vision and emergent strategies were key to building resiliency rapidly during crisis. These were achieved by establishing a unified purpose, setting clear direction, shifting mindsets, and addressing newly emerging customer needs.

### **Proposition 2 (P2). Innovative human resource management facilitates RR.**

To realize this new direction, resources needed to be deployed to new areas of attention.

Innovative HRM incorporated agile resource planning, structural flexibility, proactive talent

management, nurturing a culture of caring and embracing resource sharing. According to Drouin-Rousseau et al. (2024), organizations should nurture how employees value HRM practices to improve employee commitment to the organization. Air Canada human resource strategies changed as, *“the pandemic caused a huge shift from focusing on everyone’s usual role and responsibilities to understanding how to keep employees and passengers safe in this new environment”* (Director4).

### **Agile Resource Planning**

Agile resource planning ensured that the right resources were allocated at the right time as *“a rejuggling of expertise was required around the new priorities”* (Director5). The timely identification of resource needs, including new roles and task forces, enabled the necessary strategic flexibility to identify major changes, quickly commit resources, and act promptly (Shimizu & Hitt, 2004). According to Su and Junge (2023), resilient organizations adapt by deploying existing or novel resources to develop innovative solutions to crisis impacts. At Air Canada, novel human resource planning was necessary to survive as resources were shifted across teams as needed to meet demands and address issues.

### **Structural Flexibility**

Flexible organization structures were created as new teams and groups responded to the situation. *“There was a lot of consolidation of roles and responsibilities resulting in lots of movement of people from one part of the organization to the other. People must be agile”* (Manager7). As stated by Su and Junge (2023), novel events require informal and flexible structures that enable unconventional solutioning. Adopting holographic structures allows a dispersion of influence and diffuse power that facilitates more individual and group accountability (Morgan, 1998). Such



structures allow an organization to learn and behave based on new insights. At Air Canada, a new Global Pandemic Team with broad representation was immediately established to assimilate information and facilitate decision making, thereby stimulating the cross team learning that fosters resiliency as described by (Thürmer et al., 2020).

Sensemaking occurred considering ever-changing regulatory and health protocols, customer needs, challenges, and opportunities. Individual task forces subsequently emerged focusing on specific topics such as employees, customer experience and PCR testing. As one director described, “*structuring of some new teams requires innovation in resource deployment. The Chief Medical Officer now leads a PCR testing team that needs to be staffed*” (Director5). Flexible organizing structures presented opportunities for interactions that enriched relationships and leveraged ingenuity.

### **Talent Management**

A mix of external and internal resources equipped with essential expertise and knowledge was required as “*critical new positions emerged requiring new skills and expertise. Hygiene experts were engaged to ensure employees had an understanding and reassurance of health protocols put in place to protect themselves and passengers*” (Director5). During the pandemic, travelers want their journey to be stress free by prioritizing safety and hygiene (Amadeus, 2020).

According to Donelli et al. (2022), the uncertainty of crisis drove the need to share knowledge, exchange resources, and collaborate.

In crisis, external pressures and customer demand can impact the labor market negatively through layoffs and surplus employees resulting in flooding the labor market or losing highly skilled employees to more attractive employers (Farndale et al., 2019). Talent management became a

key concern, not only to attract the right resources but also to retain highly skilled resources and prevent organizational memory loss. This was essential as “*external companies poaching Air Canada talent remains a threat. With the emotional stress caused by the uncertainty of survival, some talented people have left while others were unfortunately furloughed, retired or released*” (Manager3). It seemed like the airline industry risked destabilization with an exodus of skilled talent to more stable industries.

### **Culture of Caring**

A culture of caring was necessary to reassure, support, and nurture employees. Managers act as facilitators, exhibiting positivity and showing empathy to support employees in emotionally distressing moments (Rivera-Prieto et al., 2022). To keep employees connected and engaged, “*strategies were put in place to support employees. More fully leveraging the Shine Program encouraged employees to show appreciation to each other for a job well done. Lots of seminars were made available to help employees cope with stress*” (Director3). Proactive human resource programs were designed and implemented at Air Canada, with the aim of retaining employees. As suggested by Kim et al. (2022), employee satisfaction can increase if HRM strategies can “help employees maintain emotional well-being and productivity during disruptive environments” (p.285). Exhibiting a compassionate spirit demonstrates an organization’s commitment to employees which strengthens resilience (Tonkin et al., 2018). Air Canada expanded access to training, resources, and supports with particular emphasis on managing stress, strengthening coping skills, and raising mental health awareness. A culture of caring was created reinforcing a sense of belonging.

### **Sharing Resources**

Air Canada established broad resource networks and obtained resources through resource extension and sharing. This provided access to experts beyond Air Canada's own resource pool. Resource networks stimulate a range of innovative actions by questioning assumptions, sharing different perspectives, and providing needed expertise. Air Canada *"Information Technology adopted a hybrid approach, building some internal expertise while also acquiring external expertise through hiring as well as by leveraging partnerships"* (Director6). Resources combined which, stimulated innovation and generated new leading-edge solutions. According to Finsterwalder and Kuppelweiser (2020), a healthy service ecosystem maintains a balance of resources across the ecosystem to manage challenges during a crisis by creating value together. This requires extensive flexibility and agility to ultimately transform to a new state. This process allows connections with other systems; often increasing positive efforts and outcomes for the ecosystem (Finsterwalder & Kuppelweiser, 2020).

Tapping into the aviation ecosystem of airport authorities, alliance partners, and industry bodies benefited Air Canada, as lessons learned were shared throughout the crisis. A director observed that *"Partners are walking in each other's shoes"* (Director2). Sharing experiences and resources to address challenges occurred as (Manager7) described, *"with respect to other airlines, it seemed like there was no competitive attitude, everyone was sharing and helping each other out regardless of company."* Interactions outside the industry were encouraged as *"Air Canada sees benefit in external collaborations from knowledge sharing, cost cutting and revenue generating perspectives"* (Manager6). Air Canada partnered with universities and the Greater Toronto Airport Authority to conduct a study of passenger PCR testing (Air Canada, 2020). Such external interactions strengthened partnerships and enabled the sharing of expertise and knowledge contributing to employee growth and resiliency capacity.

Air Canada developed RR by deploying innovative human resource management strategies encompassing resource planning, flexible organization structures, talent management strategies, a culture of caring, and resource sharing.

**Proposition 3 (P3).** *Integrated solutioning stimulates organizational learning leading to RR.*

Organizational alignment and collaborative problem solving fostered integrative solutioning. When combined with creative thinking and living the experience, organizational learning occurred. Sharing ideas and insights company wide, exploring new avenues, generating novel solutions, and implementing initiatives in record time created a rich fusion of creativity, ingenuity, and agility.

### **Organizational Alignment**

At Air Canada, organizational alignment occurred swiftly as “*a sense of urgency in the beginning of the outbreak immediately brought teams together. Ideas were accepted and quick thinking was appreciated*” (Manager1). Integrative teams with broad expertise collected, distilled, analyzed, disseminated, and synthesized information to provide meaning and help to align organizational activities. Given the unprecedented nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, planning and training were difficult (Boin et al., 2010). Collective efforts were required as the organization rode wave after wave of changes. According to Williams et al. (2017), firms should galvanize to sense disruption, creatively solve problems, and flexibly combine knowledge to deal with imminent challenges. As one director described “*adapting to a new situation, drives the need to ask everyone their thoughts and build the future state together rather than imposing ideas. It’s like building the aircraft while it’s flying. I see less people going on their own tangent and more*

*collaboration* (Director1). As new communication pathways were established a heightened level of sensing, scanning, and synchronizing occurred.

### **Collaborative Problem Solving**

Collaborative efforts integrated teams together to identify and solve problems. “*Cross department connections have deepened resulting in solutions that are set up for success*” (Director3). Robust and realistic solutions were generated using “*more cross branch understanding of impacts on other areas upstream and downstream resulting in collaborative communications*” (Manager3). Cross departmental brainstorming, idea generation, and integrated solutioning culminated in a rich fusion of possibilities, new ideas, and integrative thinking. As one director stated, “*a company that innovates is one that will have more engaged employees. By including employees in the process and involving them in problem solving and solutioning, it demonstrates that employee input is valued*” (Director4).

### **Creative Thinking**

Cross-pollination created a diverse, multi-faceted melting pot nourishing a culture of creative thinking, sharing, open mindedness, and a stimulating learning environment. A director shared that “*fostering innovation is critical rather than prescribing a solution. Allowing the employees to come up with solutions themselves is empowering teams to look to the future allowing employees to learn and grow and improve their emotional intelligence*” (Manager3). Knowledge sharing and transference of skills occurred, fertilizing insightful, higher-level thinking. According to Thürmer et al. (2020), team decision making allows individuals to contribute their expertise and learn from different insights resulting in better decisions. A dynamic cycle of facing new challenges creatively, solutioning, and learning became the norm and helped build resiliency.

## Living the Experience

By living the experience, employees developed and expanded their knowledge, “*when the pandemic hit people started to think more creatively and differently. This juggled people’s thinking processes which opened up avenues to try something new. People were now more open to explore different avenues of how work can be done*” (Manager 4). As described by De Clercq (2021), employees’ propensity to speak up and propose opportunities for improvement increases when facing hardships due to adverse conditions. According to Morgeson and Hofmann (1999), collaboration between individuals results in the emergence of a company’s collective capacity for resilience.

At Air Canada organizational learning expanded employee capacity to manage change and face new challenges. As one director observed, “*employees have been through so much this year that employees now know they can survive and do well in whatever situation comes along. We feel nothing could be worse than what we have already been through. Resilience has been built up across the organization*” (Director4). As employees lived the experience, skills, knowledge, and capabilities grew thereby increasing organizational resiliency. As defined by Lengnick-Hall et al. (2011), OR is a company’s ability to manage complex situations and emerge stronger and better equipped than before the crisis. Air Canada’s capabilities grew as “*the whole COVID-19 journey has informed the airline of lots of new learnings that help build resiliency*” (Director4).

Employees became more flexible, adaptable, and developed self-efficacy to cope better through crisis.

Air Canada’s employees worked collectively to align organizational activities, solve problems collaboratively, and share expertise. These actions enabled employees to learn from exposure to new perspectives as they developed novel insights while managing through change. Resilience

capacity was expanded by this collective effort and creative thinking that ultimately stimulated innovation and transformation.

**Proposition 4 (P4).** *RR is built by cultivating innovation.*

Cultivating innovation helps companies to build RR. By encouraging risk taking, creating an innovative environment, and ceasing opportunities to innovate, companies can transform through innovation. As observed by Heinonen & Strandvik (2021), innovations, social and health outreach and technological advancements occurred rapidly during COVID-19.

### **Encourage Risk Taking and Experimentation**

Crisis drives innovation as many stakeholders are impacted by the event, fostering an urgency to find resolutions (Gopalakrishnan & Misra, 2021). Encouraging experimentation and allowing risk taking stimulated ingenuity, curiosity, and out of the box thinking. As defined by Gopalakrishnan and Misra (2021), reactive response innovation emerges to address needs arising during crisis.

This occurred at Air Canada as management attempted to contain problems that arose from the pandemic threat. Such reactive innovation responses aimed to lessen pandemic impacts including social distancing, hyper hygiene awareness, and new regulatory requirements. Reactive innovation emerged including novel cleaning processes and adopting new protocols for passenger areas and onboard the aircraft. Converting traditional tactile onboard offerings to online delivery modes such as menus and reading materials as well as introducing sealed lunch box food service inflight, helped to instill a more hygienic feeling. The adoption of physical distancing boarding processes and more extensive cleaning procedures demanded more airplane ground time. *“As cleaning costs and aircraft turn time increase to meet new standards, there is a greater need to*

*innovate along every step of the business*” (Director5). These changes drove a revamp of the entire flight schedule and redesign of schedule planning informed by *“more cross branch collaboration and communication enabling a more wholistic view of how to reinvent”* (Manager3). “New teams with members from across the organization were formed to tackle problems, develop solutions, and speed up decision making” (Director5).

### **Create Innovative Environments**

Reinvention through active involvement and creativity was encouraged as *“the COVID-19 crisis stimulated the willingness to take new risks and try things”* (Manager2). Managers created an innovative environment where people felt safe to share their ideas and originality. As described by Ouellette (2024), giving decisional freedom to employees allows them cognitive flexibility to exhibit adaptive behaviors. *“During the pandemic, ideas were accepted, and quick thinking was appreciated”* (Manager1). Employees were inspired to be inquisitive, inventive, and respectful of different perspectives. This innovative environment galvanized employees into action. *“A just get it done mentality was instilled”* (Director6). Psychological safety relates to how employees perceive their work environment as being conducive enough to take interpersonal risks such as asking questions, seeking help, or offering critical feedback (Edmondson, 1999). By creating a culture of innovation that encouraged flexibility, exploration, and creativity, desirable behaviors such as resourcefulness, agility and ingenuity flourished.

### **Cease Innovative Opportunities**

Air Canada’s management took advantage of opportunities by quickly assessing alternatives, implementing solutions, and investing in resources, thereby igniting rapid innovation (Von Krogh et al., 2020). Air Canada revitalized Information Technology and embraced digital



transformation. A director described *“there was an accelerated adoption of technology. Touch free baggage tag printing was introduced quickly at the onset of the pandemic...Advancing touch free service and digitization became critical. Everyone realized how valuable technology was and rallied around it”* (Director4). Moving quickly, removing barriers, investing, and improvising accelerated the innovative momentum.

During the pandemic, airline operations were significantly reduced as traveller demand shrivelled. Ironically, this opened up opportunities to investigate, reinvent, and implement initiatives quickly, as the usual risk of operational disruption was minimized. Air Canada leveraged these moments as *“Information Technology projects were accelerated as globally the majority of stations were shut down so rolling out new software to stations went faster”* (Director1). With many airplanes grounded, staff were available to test and execute as *“Information Technology took advantage of aircraft operational downtime to launch new improvements quickly”* (Director6). The implementation process was simplified compared to normal times of full fleet deployment.

This unique moment in time, offered an opportunity to rethink the entire Air Canada customer journey. According to the Rethink Travel Global Survey (Amadeus, 2020), 43% of travelers indicated that the biggest concern about traveling during COVID-19 was the increased risk of catching or transmitting the virus. At Air Canada, proactive innovation emerged as customer and employee needs changed, mostly driven by an innate fear of catching the virus. The Rethink Travel Global Survey also revealed that 36% of travelers would feel more comfortable traveling if social distancing was possible throughout the journey (Amadeus, 2020). Air Canada worked to reduce queues and minimize physical contact with others. Expansion of multiple self-service options occurred at Air Canada to accommodate social distancing and reduce interpersonal

service delivery. Such innovations resulted in the strategic development of new models with redesigned service offerings and delivery (Heinonen & Strandvik, 2021).

According to O'Halloran and Griffin (2019), digital transformation encompasses a reinvention of how things are done. Touchless, digitized options were explored as *“pandemic events created an opportunity to rebuild the service from start to finish across the customer journey. You don't often have a chance to start with a clean slate with such a complex service. The team got very excited about the opportunity to look at every single component of service and make decisions with respect to what should stay and what should go”* (Director4).

As the airline innovated both reactively in response to threats and proactively to address changing customer needs and emerging opportunities, resiliency capacity was strengthened. *“Innovation made things easier for employees. Respect and recognition of the importance of each group was shown. As a result, processes, procedures, and policies improved (Director4).* As a manager inferred, *“it is essential to innovate to survive”* (Manager7). Air Canada's ability to encourage risk taking and experimentation, create an innovative environment, and seize opportunities to innovate, significantly contributed to building RR.

## **CONCLUSION**

The unprecedented and prolonged COVID-19 pandemic crisis created extraordinary conditions, complications, and unknowns with lasting effects. Although there is ample literature on managing during uncertainty and OR, rarely had the magnitude and global impact of such radical changes occurred. Particularly, the airline sector was impacted significantly as traveller demand dried up. As airline services facilitate the free movement of passengers across the globe, the

industry is reliant on passenger travel demand and global conditions that permit unrestricted travel (Ho et al., 2023). In general, the industry is vulnerable to all types of disruptions ranging from economic, health, or weather-related factors. Given the multinational service complexities and exposure to fluctuations in demand (Ho et al., 2023), it is important for airline managers to understand how to manage better in these increasingly challenging and dynamic conditions.

The objective of this study was to understand how an international airline builds resiliency quickly during crisis as a window into more optimal ways of managing in changing conditions. A new concept and model of RR was introduced to describe how an organization can build resiliency quickly as employees live and learn through the crisis experience itself. As the interviews were conducted while the employees were actually living through the event, the information captured resonated with meaning. The experiences shared were rich, deep, and very insightful providing a snapshot of a critical moment in time.

The compressed time element distinguishes the concept of RR from OR. Managing the tensions arising as the pandemic unfolded, and the magnitude of simultaneous impacts that emerged, put management under tremendous pressure with little time to absorb and think. Managers had to respond immediately, steering the organization through the dynamic waves of crisis while leading flexibly and adopting an inspiring and compassionate spirit (Kim et al., 2022). Revealing how managers can swiftly achieve this is important as disruptions continue to unfold in future.

### **Practical Implications**

The RR model can be useful in guiding managers in practical methods that can be applied during disruption. Four propositions of management approaches that culminate to build resiliency rapidly during crisis were revealed as managers grew and learned by living the event. The first

approach was to create a renewed vision and emergent strategy to provide new direction and guidance for employees struggling to make sense of the crisis. By creating a unified purpose, setting clear direction, pivoting the mindset, and addressing elevated customer expectations, the airline steered effectively through the disruption. Once direction was set, the second approach was to adopt innovative human resource management tactics including resource planning, flexible organizational structures, talent management, culture of caring and resources sharing. These facilitated the deployment of the right resources at the opportune time while supporting employee well-being. The third approach was to encourage deployed resources to solution collectively through organizational alignment, collaborative problem solving, creative thinking, and learning as they lived the experience. Lastly, converting these collective ideas into transformational solutions involved cultivating innovation by encouraging risk taking and experimentation, creating innovative environments, and ceasing innovation opportunities. By adopting these new approaches managers can morph their methods in moments of disruptions to build resiliency rapidly. The RR model shows how threats can cause disruption and the need for change to respond and manage the challenges that arise. Detailed explanations are provided on how to sequentially apply these approaches. Quotes are shared providing relevant insights from managers that resonate and provide meaning to the situation as they lived through it. These reflections will help managers draw connections to their own experiences on how companies can emerge stronger and better prepared to face future disruptions.

Overall, this study makes several academic contributions. First, empirical evidence complements the literature on managing uncertainty through crisis by revealing management approaches taken by an international airline during the pandemic. Secondly, OR theory is augmented by introducing a new concept of RR distinguished from OR by the element of time. Management

approaches are compared by the time available to plan and act to address situations of monumental change. These approaches are sequentially connected as an iterative cycle is initiated.

Rich descriptions of insights gained by living through the crisis experience provided deep understanding of management approaches that led to building resiliency quickly. Lastly a new concept and model of RR was presented offering insights for academic and managerial practice by revealing ways to manage during future crises and build resilience rapidly.

This topic was very relevant during COVID-19 as organizations struggled through the pandemic. Inconceivable and unexpected events are difficult to fully plan for, given the interconnectedness of external impacts and complexity of potential situations and risks (Rosenthal, 2003). It is important for managers to lead employees through uncertainty to survive and ideally thrive by creating a stronger, more resilient organization. As the airline industry continually faces disruptions as well as positive changes, building resiliency rapidly can help to manage them.

New knowledge and capacity are necessary to create viewpoints that help to guide through change (Mithani et al., 2021). Building RR through a renewed vision and emergent strategy, innovative HRM, organizational learning and integrated solutioning and innovation combine to shape new mental models and outlooks. Managers better equipped to lead through disruption as well as positive changes are able to quickly find ways to overcome potential negative impacts and exploit positive ones.

Using a single case study of a global airline based in Canada, limits the generalization of findings. The inability to access and interview more employees limits the collection of different perspectives that could further substantiate findings. Expanding the study to other airlines and

tourism companies across geographies would help to compare and enrich the research. A further limitation is the applicability of the concept to different industries therefore it would be interesting in future research to see if RR occurs in other sectors. As the model of RR is new, further examination and testing of the concept is necessary to help prepare airline managers to face future crises.

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