Being an ethical leader during the apocalypse: Lessons from *the walking dead* to face the COVID-19 crisis

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ABSTRACT

This article draws on Gareth Morgan's theory of organizational metaphors. Using imaginization, this research examines practices of ethical leadership during a crisis, using *The Walking Dead* television series as a reference. *The Walking Dead* offers an artistic representation of different leadership styles, with business organizations likened to groups of survivors. Its post-apocalyptic setting offers something of an analogy to the COVID-19 crisis. Each firm's struggle for survival in the face of external threats is paralleled with each community's struggle to protect members' lives, preserve resources, and pursue development. The practices of the leaders in the program are compared to those of the leaders of firms such as P&G, Boeing, GM, Renault-Nissan, IBM, BP, GE, Berkshire Hathaway, Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon, Microsoft, Ali Baba, Netflix, Airbnb, Uber, and SpaceX. This paper illustrates why ethical leadership goes far beyond charisma and competencies to involve deep motivations and sincere emotions and why it is accessible to everyone through a process of learning and transformation. The study shows the need to adapt leadership style to context. Good leaders know when to step back, meditate, and be lucid. They balance consultation and initiative. They do not fear other leaders and mentor new ones.

1. Introduction

According to the OECD, the COVID-19 crisis is multidimensional, with aspects spanning health, social, political, and economic spheres. With the simultaneous confinement of half of humanity, many businesses must survive with fewer employees and customers. The managers of these companies suddenly find themselves in a lasting catastrophe. This world is reminiscent of those depicted in post-apocalyptic films or series. In these fictions, leaders must deal with extreme situations and make difficult decisions, which can provide lessons for facing the current crisis (Buchanan & Hällgren, 2019).

This paper is based on Gareth Morgan's theory of organizational metaphors (1986). Using imaginization, this study examines leadership styles in times of crisis from an ethical perspective, using *The Walking Dead* series as a reference. A whole range of analogies are made, following the same approach as the article "The Othello conundrum: The inner contagion of leadership" (Stein, 2005). This study explores the universe of *The Walking Dead*, an American TV horror show that was

launched by AMC on 31 October 2010 and began its 10th season in October 2019. This series unfolds in the near future, when a virus has transformed almost all of humanity into zombies. The main character in *The Walking Dead* is Rick Grimes, a police officer. The character is played by British actor Andrew Lincoln, who was previously little known, despite his roles in the series *The Teacher* and *Afterlife* and the films *Gangster Number One* and *Love Actually*. In the first episode, *Days Gone Bye*, Rick Grimes is shot and falls into a coma. When he wakes up, he realizes that the hospital in which he finds himself has been devastated and that a large part of humanity has turned into the undead. He goes in search of his family and forms a group of survivors who strive to live in this hostile environment, where the zombies are not necessarily the greatest danger.

While the coronavirus does not turn people into zombies, some similarities remain: the hostile environment, fear, confinement, withdrawal, discouragement, uncertainty, and lack of resources. *The Walking Dead* offers an artistic representation of different leadership styles (Lau & Yip, 2018). Season after season, Rick Grimes meets, and sometimes

fights, leaders who all manage and take care of their community in different (and more or less ethical) ways. This study uses a number of metaphors. Business organizations are described as groups of survivors. Organizational leaders are the leaders of these groups. The economic crisis is represented by the post-apocalyptic environment. Each firm's struggle for survival in the face of internal and external threats is paralleled with the struggle by each community in the TV series to protect its members' lives, preserve its resources, and pursue its development, despite the tremendous difficulties it faces.

Although it tells a slightly different story, *The Walking Dead* is inspired by a popular comic book by Robert Kirkman, illustrated by Tony Moore and Charlie Adlard. With its 147 episodes, it is one of the three most popular TV shows in the world, alongside *Big Bang Theory* and *NCIS*. It is the most watched by women and by the key target of 18–49 year old. *The Walking Dead* beat viewing records for a series airing on a cable channel, especially with the first episode of Season 5, *No Sanctuary*, which was watched by 17.3 million people. It is one of the best-rated series on American television and the most tweeted about in the world. Its popularity in terms of audiences and buzz is comparable to that of *Friends* and *Desperate Housewives* in their time. *The Walking Dead* is so popular that it ended the undisputed supremacy of the NFL, which is broadcast by NBC at the same time and is regularly surpassed by the series. These results are extraordinary considering that this program is quite exclusive: a large proportion of the public cannot stand its gore, violence, and immorality.

A key feature of *The Walking Dead* is how the characters change, and how many of them gradually lose their humanity and values in the face of the violence and adversity of the world in which they must survive. However, zombies are only an entertaining metaphor for the personal or professional trials that we face in life. Groups form, and leaders emerge on the strength of their personality, skills, managerial qualities, and ability to make choices and protect others (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). The practices and attitudes of these leaders, who face critical situations and make life-or-death decisions for themselves and their companions in misfortune, are comparable with situations in the corporate world and provide lessons for businesspeople everywhere (Morgan, 1986). This article explores the most charismatic and representative leaders of *The Walking Dead* and proposes managerial recommendations. The good and bad practices of the show's leaders are compared with those of leaders of multinational firms such as P&G, Boeing, GM, Renault-Nissan, IBM, BP, GE, Berkshire Hathaway, Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon, Microsoft, Ali Baba, Netflix, Airbnb, Uber, and SpaceX.

Even though the leaders whose adventures are described in the TV show are stereotypical, such mythological characters from fiction and fairy tales are present in organizations and businesses, and they have a major influence on how the members of these groups define themselves, build their character and evaluate each other (Moxnes & Moxnes, 2016). Leadership appears impossible to define and difficult to discuss, leading researchers to study the topic in unusual ways (Harding, Lee, Ford, & Learmonth, 2011). Movie directors and TV show creators often use their work to convey messages and make analogies between the fictional situations portrayed and sociological problems in the real world. George A. Romero, the father of the modern zombie film, and a major influence on Robert Kirkman, used his films to denounce phenomena that preoccupied him, such as discrimination, racism, over-mediatization, materialism, and the consumer society.

The first section of the paper studies Rick Grimes and the ethical, heroic, charismatic, competent, collaborative leader (Grund, 1996). The second section covers non-ethical, antagonistic, authoritarian, dominant, hostile leaders. The third section deals with more traditional, paternalistic or maternalistic, protective leaders. The conclusion provides perspectives and recommendations.

2. Becoming an ethical leader

The character of Rick Grimes, deputy sheriff of King County, is

introduced as an honest man who wants to enforce law and order. His skills and authority naturally lead him to become the leader of a group from Atlanta that is trying to cope with the apocalypse. This group has to face terrible hardships and faces other hostile groups, which is reminiscent of the conflicts between the major industrial groups ready to do anything to defeat their opponents. Gradually, many members will be killed and replaced, while others will gain experience and develop qualities that will make them survivors and fighters (McCall, 2004). The performance of the team and its acknowledgment of the effectiveness of the way the group functions are factors that enable a greater level of interaction under ethical leadership (Martin, Emich, McClean, & Woodruff, 2021; Soriano & Martínez, 2007). Behaviors inspired by ethical leadership limit passive leadership and encourage active social participation (Rey-Marti, Ribeiro-Soriano, & Palacios-Marqués, 2016; Vullinghs, De Hoogh, Den Hartog, & Boon, 2018).

2.1. A clearly defined mission and role

Rick Grimes is a leader who persuades and influences others. He wants the group to achieve the best possible results and sets an example (Murphy & Enderle, 1995). He does everything necessary to enable his followers to survive as long as possible and in the best possible conditions. He is a hard worker, like all renowned business leaders: Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, Mark Zuckerberg, Sergey Brin, Larry Page, Jeff Bezos, Brian Chesky and Elon Musk all have the reputation of not counting their hours and being combative and highly resilient. In Season 5, Episode 12 (*Remember*), when he meets Deanna, the mayor of the city of *Alexandria*, he sets the course, and the mission is clear: "*It's all about survival now.*" Other similar statements confirm this state of mind "*We do what we need to do, and then we live*" and "*I've killed people. I don't even know how many by now. But I know why they're all dead. They're dead so my family, all those people out there, can be alive. So I could be alive for them.*" As a leader, Rick Grimes knows every member of his group very well and knows that many of them will not be able to survive in their current state. He helps them learn to master the hostile new environment and acquire the physical and mental qualities and skills necessary to do so.

In return, the group members trust him and turn to him to protect and guide them (Hernandez, Long, & Sitkin, 2014). However, Rick Grimes does not have any particular title or other advantages that could justify his leadership role. He shares his group's living conditions, worries, and battles. As a leader, he does not consider himself superior to those who follow him, or better than them, or more valuable (Northouse, 2016). Above all, he seeks legitimacy as a leader through his actions, words, and values, as well as through the recognition of his group. He says several times that if someone thinks he can do something in his own way, that person is free to do so, as long as it does not put anyone else in danger. Rick Grimes does everything to protect his family. He even kills his rival and best friend Shane Walsh, who is at first unstable, but then loses control and acts with great immorality, challenging Rick's authority and plotting to assassinate him. Rick takes responsibility for his failures and regularly questions himself, while valuing collective action during victories (Pearce, Wassenaar, & Manz, 2014). Although Rick Grimes is a charismatic leader, he is above all an extremely effective team manager who (1) seeks to do what needs to be done, (2) reflects on what is good for his group, (3) establishes action plans, (4) takes responsibility for his decisions, (5) takes responsibility for his communication, (6) concentrates on opportunities rather than problems, (7) conducts productive meetings and (8) says "we" rather than "I" (Drucker, 2004).

Charisma is not enough to manage a group in a post-apocalyptic world or to be the CEO of a multinational company in a hyper-competitive context. "Corporations have increasingly sought CEOs who are above all else charismatic, whose fame and force of personality impress analysts and the business media, but whose experience and abilities are not necessarily right for companies' specific needs" (Khurana, 2002, p. 366). Being charismatic can even be considered an

affliction or an irrational quest, threatening business integrity. The myth of the providential manager or the messianic corporate savior is incompatible with today's participative, horizontal management.

Some leadership styles fundamentally manipulate feelings and demand cooperation in building a common identity to exert a positive influence on recruitment and achieve higher rates of success (Soriano & Peris-Ortiz, 2011). The social identity achieved by Rick encourages unrest toward other groups based on fear (McDermott, 2018). The structured, cohesive cooperation of followers creates affective attachment built around the identity of the leader.

Rick Grimes quickly organizes a council to govern the group's destiny and make decisions for the collective (Pearce, 2004). On different occasions, this council determines whether to leave a threatened area, to try and save a missing member of the group, to attack another group or to get rid of a captured enemy. Although Rick Grimes is the head of the council, he accepts that the decisions do not always conform to his own wishes. One of Rick's goals is to stimulate cohesion and team spirit rather than individualism. He knows that everyone will have the greatest chance of surviving if they remain united and support each other: "*We survive this by pulling together, not apart*" or "*We got here together, and we're still here.*" However, one of Rick Grimes's most famous lines demonstrates another tendency. In the final episode of Season 2, *Beside the Dying Fire*, when the farm where they are sheltering is being invaded by the zombies, Rick Grimes reveals his authority by saying: "*This is not a democracy anymore.*" The death of several relatives and the multiple dangers surrounding the group may explain this desire to take things in hand and assume his responsibilities.

After starting out as a radical, authoritarian leader, Steve Jobs adopted the same collaborative, participative approach when he returned to Apple in 1997. He surrounded himself with other experienced leaders with the operational skills to put his ideas in motion (McCall, 2004); he delegated important responsibilities to them and allowed them to make strategic decisions. He trained new leaders, such as Tim Cook, his successor as CEO. He instilled a participative spirit at all hierarchical levels of his company, as he himself explained in an interview: "One of the keys to Apple is Apple's an incredibly collaborative company (…). There's tremendous teamwork at the top of the company, which filters down to tremendous teamwork throughout the company." Jeff Bezos also hired senior leaders and made them work as a team to pilot Amazon's development as the largest Internet retailer in the world. Mark Zuckerberg decided to entrust Facebook's operational management to someone else. He appointed Sheryl Sandberg as COO to supervise commercial, marketing, and financial aspects, so he could focus on strategic vision, technological innovation, and R&D. He is known for promoting talent and valuing the managers of his company.

2.2. An improving leader with both innate and acquired personal qualities

Rick Grimes has many natural qualities that have enabled him to become a leader: charisma, intelligence, honesty, sincerity, self-assuredness, and determination (Bryman, Collinson, Grint, Jackson, & Uhl-Bien, 2011). He changes leadership style as the situation requires, while striving to remain authentic and faithful to certain principles. Sometimes authoritarian, but also helpful, he attaches great importance to moral values and to his ethical code (Gabriel, 2015). Rick embodies the will of the group that supports him and shares the same goals and priorities as himself. He is influential and persuasive while remaining attentive and receptive (Bass & Bass, 2009). Leadership is therefore a group process by which leaders encourage all members to go beyond their limits and accomplish more than they think themselves capable of (Northouse, 2016). Leaders are also brought out of their comfort zone to stimulate collective creativity and avoid putting the group in a situation where they might relax and become less vigilant (Raelin, 2018). Leaders demonstrate innovation and creativity, seize opportunities, appreciate challenges, and take risks and act boldly (Bolden & Gosling, 2006). This approach brings to mind the personality of Elon Musk, CEO of SpaceX,

Tesla, and Neuralink, a serial entrepreneur who does not take no for an answer. He is highly inventive and keeps pushing back the limits of what is possible. He has overcome many technological challenges and has taken considerable risks by investing a fortune in projects that seem overambitious and doomed to failure. Yet he has accumulated enormous success and is making his mark on the history of the Internet, artificial intelligence, the automotive industry, public transport, and space conquest.

When individuals have a developing mindset, they consider it possible to learn leadership through effort and accumulated experience. This value is the opposite of the mindset that only allows for innate leadership, in terms of those who are born with the ability to lead (Chase, 2010).

While Rick Grimes has a heroic, reckless side that is actually very stimulating (Grund, 1996), his impulsiveness and fiery temper can sometimes play tricks on him. He learns to control himself and be more measured through contact with another leader, Hershel Greene, a peaceful farmer and father of three children (seven in the comic book) with whom the group seeks refuge and who saves Carl, Rick's son, in Season 2. After observing Rick Grimes and his companions for a while, Hershel comments severely: "*It's a wonder you people have survived this long.*" Gradually, and especially in Season 4, Hershel comes to play a moderating role, and Rick's council values his wisdom highly (Murphy & Enderle, 1995). He helps Rick become much more optimistic and consider more subtle, sustainable solutions in a shared leadership model (Pearce et al., 2014). Hershel teaches Rick both practical knowledge, such as plant culture, and moral principles, such as redemption and forgiveness (Gabriel, 2015). Hershel also provides strong support after the death of Lori, Rick's wife, an event that traumatizes the hero and makes him delirious and depressed. Despite hardship and suffering, Hershel does not lose his faith in God and tries to pass on his Christian values to Rick. The respectful relations between the two leaders lead to subtle, farsighted decision making, until the tragic death of Hershel after being decapitated by the Governor (another leader discussed later).

While at the beginning of the series Rick Grimes does everything to compromise, resist provocation and satisfy everyone, sometimes taking a number of risks, he becomes radical in the later seasons. This rigor and authoritarianism undoubtedly stem from the failures he suffers. However, Rick Grimes also wants to show that he does what he says and says what he does. When his group is captured by Gareth at *Terminus* at the end of Season 4, Rick Grimes predicts that he will kill him with an axe he had hidden in the forest: "*There's a compound bow and a machete with a red handle. That's what I'm gonna use to kill you.*" When he says this, he and his friends are prisoners and have no way to escape. As soon as the opportunity arises, he does not hesitate to keep his promise. He does not kill Gareth for revenge or pleasure but to prevent him from continuing to harm other people and to show his group that they can count on him to do everything necessary to protect them.

In the first episode of Season 4, *30 Days without an Accident*, Rick Grimes and his friends develop a recruitment questionnaire for people hoping to join their group: "*How many walkers have you killed? How many people have you killed? Why?*" The aim is to assess their ability to defend the group but above all to understand the interviewee's intentions. In the face of multiple threats and a particularly hostile environment, the leader's role is not to protect those who follow him but to prepare them to cope with what might happen and develop their adaptive capacity (Heifetz & Laurie, 2001). This is what Rick Grimes seeks to accomplish with his son, explaining to him that one must remain strong and vigilant and learn how to defend oneself against being killed or captured by rival gangs. He wants to give him the hope of a better world, despite the apocalypse surrounding them: "*If you don't fight, you die.*" When his son is shot in the head and lies unconscious, Rick explains what motivates him: "*I want to show you the new world, Carl. I want to make it a reality for you.*" Bob Dudley became the CEO of BP during the Deepwater Horizon Disaster, the largest marine oil spill of all time, which killed 11 people and released 5 million barrels of oil into the Gulf of Mexico. He behaved

as a calm, responsible, compassionate, humble, and empathic leader, not only competent but also sincere and deeply human when he spoke about the people and local communities affected and the environmental consequences (Pearce et al., 2014). During this awful crisis, he was able to restore hope to all stakeholders. Bob Dudley has faced conflict, harassment, and even death threats. However, he has always overcome these challenges with courage and determination. Since the BP oil disaster, he has worked to transform his firm into a safer, more sustainable business.

2.3. A relational process that transforms both leader and followers

Rick Grimes strives to be a guide and coach, imparting knowledge, skills and behavior to others to help them become stronger and face adversity (Zaar, Van den Bossche, & Gijselaers, 2019). He wants to share what he has learned and show people how to overcome difficulty. As he says to the inexperienced inhabitants of the fortified city of *Alexandria*, "*We'll survive. I'll show you how.*" This form of inspirational and transformational leadership is characteristic of Steve Jobs, Bill Gates, Mark Zuckerberg, and Elon Musk, who have tried to foster positive change, development and progress among those who work with them by acting as models (Lichtenstein, Smith, & Torbert, 1995; Tse, To, & Chiu, 2018). The person Rick Grimes most wants to protect and make stronger is undoubtedly his son Carl. He warns him that it takes only a second to change a situation and advises him to be careful not to be infected by the undead or to be taken prisoner by a hostile group: "*You are not safe. No matter how many people are around, or how clear the area looks, no matter what anyone says, no matter what you think, you are not safe. It only takes one second. One second and it's over. Never let your guard down, ever.*" In the current economic environment, characterized by instability and rapid change, events can also happen very quickly, disrupting sectors and markets. Technological innovation and political, climate or social change threaten the survival of the largest multinationals. A leader must be aware of these threats and become proactive, because one lapse in concentration can be fatal to a product, a market, or an entire company.

Service leadership aims to invert the goal of achieving the best in others, placing leaders in the service of their collaborators, and enabling personal development based on the empowerment of employees and the effectiveness of leaders who normally follow a transformational leadership style (Zhang et al., 2019). For example, Amancio Ortega, owner of Inditex, developed the habit of delegating tasks to his employees to achieve greater learning capacity.

Rick Grimes wants to prevent people's weaknesses that jeopardize others' lives. He expects everyone to adapt to the situation and avoid naivety or idealism. All must move forward and work to ensure that their behavior is not a source of danger. Some of Rick's statements aim to remove any doubt and to ensure everyone else takes the right attitude: "*If something's in front of you, you kill it,*" "*Don't talk. Think,*" or "*We keep going for them. We can't turn back because we're afraid.*" Rick Grimes knows how to reassure and mobilize his troops, but most of all, he shows great self-confidence, even in the most desperate situations. He also uses this assurance to dissuade hostile groups from attacking his own, such as when he says, "*Do you have any idea who you are talking to?*" or "*Confrontation's never been something we've had trouble with.*" Even though they are prisoners and seem to have no chance of escape, Rick Grimes exudes confidence in himself and his team, saying, "*They're gonna feel pretty stupid when they find out… they're screwin' with the wrong people.*"

The spiritual leadership put in practice by Grimes acts as a motivator based on its altruistic effect on the business relationships of the members of the community, creating affective engagement that exerts a positive influence on centrality (Usman, Ali, Ogbonnaya, & Babalola, 2021). Juan Roig, CEO of the supermarket chain Mercadona, which employs more than 90,000 people in Spain and Portugal, has followed a model of talent retention for the last 40 years, based on the effective engagement of belonging.

Rick Grimes shares and manages the emotions of those who accompany him (Walter, Cole, & Humphrey, 2011). He suffers with them, comforts them when necessary, never minimizes the trials they go through and supports them with sympathy and energy. "Great leaders move us. They ignite our passion and inspire the best in us. When we try to explain why they are so effective, we speak of strategy, vision or powerful ideas. But the reality is much more primal: great leadership works through the emotions" (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2013, p. 3). While Rick Grimes's personality and skills may have been decisive in making him a leader, his ability to encourage cohesion, motivation and progression within the group enabled him to remain one (Conger, 1991). One of Mark Zuckerberg's numerous talents is that of showing his passion for what he does, and arousing passion in his staff at Facebook. The same can be said of Brian Chesky, CEO of Airbnb, Reed Hastings, CEO of Netflix, and numerous other business leaders.

Rick Grimes's main quality as a leader is his emotional intelligence (Walter et al., 2011), more than his analytical capacity, charisma, and technical skills. Through his empathy and compassion, he manages to analyze situations effectively, understand and anticipate the reactions of each member of the group and be attentive to others' needs and difficulties. Emotional intelligence consolidates the leadership position that Rick Grimes has acquired through more technical and intellectual qualities (Wolff, Pescosolido, & Druskat, 2002; Walter et al., 2011). He manages emotions within the group and gives direction even in times of crisis and defeat. He formulates the appropriate emotional response to mobilize the group and give them the desire to take action. Shared emotions and action create solidarity and cohesion, strong attachment, and gratitude toward the leader (Pescosolido, 2002). Rick Grimes's itinerary and experience show that the moral, emotional, and relational dimensions of leadership are much more important than knowledge and skills (Bolden & Gosling, 2006; Gabriel, 2015). Leaders are legitimate only if they manage to create a balanced, multilateral relationship with the members of the group, based on trust, listening, complicity and attention, which leads to involvement, commitment, development, and the blossoming of individual talent (Hernandez et al., 2014; Lichtenstein et al., 1995). All these key success factors are found in Mary Barra of General Motors, who, in addition to her technical skills, bases her management on honesty, integrity, authenticity, sincerity and commitment.

3. Non-ethical leaders: Antagonistic and dominant

While Rick Grimes is the main, most complete character in the series, other leaders appear for relatively long periods, providing scope for a detailed history and personality. The main leaders appearing in the series are the antagonists of Rick Grimes, who often exercise brutal authority over enemy groups and are therefore perceived as threats. Since their leadership patterns are completely different, it seems to be of interest to study them here as a counterpoint to Rick Grimes's form of leadership. These examples demonstrate why the cult of strong leadership can be dangerous and can lead to perverse authoritarian excesses (Brown, 2015).

3.1. The authoritarian and ruthless leader

The Governor is played by British actor David Morrissey. His real name, which is very rarely used in the show, is Philip Blake. He is the charismatic, ruthless leader of the fortified town of *Woodbury*. He is undoubtedly one of the most terrifying and immoral characters in *The Walking Dead*, although two flashback episodes about his past demonstrate that earlier he was a good, caring, devoted man. This story illustrates how power can turn a good person into a megalomaniac and paranoid psychopath (De Vries, 2005). The fear of losing his community and the many dangers he has had to face transform the Governor into a leader who is prepared to perform the most horrible acts, justifying them as necessary to protect his group (Hackman & Johnson, 2013).

The Governor has suffered a lot, and his personality is strongly influenced by certain events: he was abused by his father when he was a

child, he was mistreated at work, he lost his wife in an accident, and his daughter became a zombie after being bitten by one. He keeps her hidden in a closet in the hope that a cure will one day bring her back to normal. One of the richest men in the world, Bill Gates, dropped out of college and failed with his first start-up. Oprah Winfrey, one of the wealthiest women in the world, came from a very modest background, suffered abuse from her family as a child, lost her first baby when she was only 14, and was fired from her first TV show. R. H. Macy failed numerous times before launching what would become Macy's, one of the biggest retail stores in the world. Colonel Sanders was fired from many firms, and his secret chicken recipe was rejected more than a thousand times before he co-created the KFC brand at 65 years old. After two failures that lost him everything and ruined his reputation, Henry Ford created his own car company, revolutionized industry with the assembly line system and became one of the richest businesspeople in the world. Thomas Edison is famous for remarking that he found almost 10,000 ways not to make the light bulb work before he finally invented it. Sir James Dyson followed his example by creating 5,126 inoperable prototypes for his bagless vacuum before making a working one. Jack Ma, the richest man in China, failed his school exams several times, was rejected from Harvard 10 times, was turned downed for dozens of jobs (notably at KFC), and could not find investors for Ali Baba before it became one of the 10 most valuable firms in the world.

Constantly distrustful, insensitive, and obsessed with power, the Governor also has an unbounded ego. He views himself as exceptionally intelligent and as the only person capable of envisaging an ideal post-apocalyptic society, of which he would obviously be the leader. Because he sees himself as a providential man, capable by himself of bringing salvation to all the members of his group, he does not surround himself with or train competent subordinates to whom he can delegate. The Governor is the incarnation of the early 20th century definition of a leader, which is now outdated. He has the ability to incite those under his authority to conform to his will and to arouse obedience, respect, loyalty and cooperation (Moore, 1927). The early Steve Jobs leadership style was quite similar, with no consultation or compromise. Despite having a visionary personality and being considered a leader, this autocratic dimension of his personality led to his rejection by his own company before his triumphant comeback. He had to learn to be patient, listen to others, consult, assume failure and share glory. He also had to stop wanting to control everything, from the furniture style to the restaurant menu.

Control and centralization are at the heart of the society founded by the Governor (Northouse, 2016). Unlike Rick Grimes, who wants to develop autonomy in his group, the Governor tries to increase the dependence of others on him to strengthen his power and domination. He is not a leader who influences but a leader who uses coercion to induce change (Northouse, 2016). He is a leader who decides but decides on his own, then imposing his choices on others by every means at his disposal, regardless of morality or ethics (Sievers, 2008). He punishes those who disobey and promises rewards to those who follow his orders. The members of his group are only resources to him, and his relations with them remain superficial and detached. This view is exactly the opposite of what makes present leaders successful (Soriano, 2010). Rather than trying to silence criticism, as many managers do, David Taylor, CEO of P&G, encourages and values it. He does not try to enforce his own ideas but wants every employee to question his decisions and the existing processes and to propose innovative and off-the-wall solutions.

The Governor is particularly Machiavellian. His taste for chess is very representative of his personality. He is not afraid of sacrificing some members of his group to achieve his goals, as he explains: "*You can lose a lot of soldiers but still win the game.*" He also says to his opponent during a game: "*You can't think forever. Sooner or later, you gotta make a move.*" The Governor manages to be dreadful on the battlefield but always has an overview of the situation. He is therefore a man of action but one who always has a long-term perspective and stays several moves ahead. He

defines himself as a pirate. He determines the law and never submits to anyone. His rebellious side makes him audacious, unpredictable, and dangerous. The Governor does not lack vision, energy, authority, and strategic direction to capture and retain new followers (Jones & Goffee, 2000). However, he hardly ever shows his humanity and sensitivity. He never expresses empathy or compassion for others; he does not really care about them, and he is insincere (Jones & Goffee, 2000; Mahsud, Yukl, & Prussia, 2010). His lack of relational skills and his unfriendliness deprive him of loyal allies. Unlike Rick Grimes, and like in a mafia system, he does not try to help others progress and become leaders. On the contrary, he prefers to keep them in ignorance and cultivates their weaknesses to keep them submissive. His kingdom is therefore fragile and can quickly collapse from a lack of support and solid foundations.

3.2. The leader for whom the end justifies the means

Gareth is the leader of *Terminus*, a sort of El Dorado upon which all the characters in the series converge in Season 4. Several signs informing that "*Those Who Arrive Survive*" are positioned to indicate the way to this so-called sanctuary. Gareth is the direct opponent of Rick Grimes at the start of Season 5. The hero and his group soon realize that they have been captured by cannibals led by a leader whose overriding aim is efficiency. For Gareth, the situation requires radical, unorthodox solutions (Stogdill, 1974). Food is required, and cannibalism is an easy, practical way to get it. Gareth controls the members of his group through collusion in cruelty (De Vries, 2005). He considers that goodness only leads to weakness and vulnerability, whereas cruelty makes them formidable predators. This collective psychosis leads to deviant behavior. It is found in some organizations, triggering a destructive spiral (Sievers, 2008). Many business managers still believe that the end justifies the means and will do almost anything, even the unethical and illegal, to achieve their goals. Their path is strewn with the corpses of their colleagues, unable to keep pace or eliminated because they were obstacles. For example, Google accused Uber of industrial espionage aimed at stealing its self-driving car technologies, and Apple and Samsung have clashed in court for years over charges of patent usurpation.

Before the end of the world, Gareth was a good, generous man, with high moral principles and a willingness to help others, especially the weak. This is how he begins, and how he gradually gains the confidence of the members of his group. However, after a violent attack on *Terminus,* during which he was tortured, his character and ideas change. Gareth believes that in the new world, ravaged by the virus, even extreme measures are acceptable if he is to survive (Buchanan & Hällgren, 2019). This traumatic event shaped Gareth as a leader. He had to rethink himself completely, reassess his behavior and values and change his references (Thomas, 2008). Being particularly intelligent, philosophical, and manipulative, he managed to rally an increasing number of people to his ideas, including his mother. All became cannibals and started seeing visitors as future meals. *Terminus* then became a giant trap. For those who enter, the choice is simple: "*Join us or feed us.*" Gareth and his companions murder without remorse in their own interests. Rick Grimes eventually kills Gareth because of this savagery and ferocity, considering him totally perverted and irredeemable. Business cannibalism also exists, and some leaders practice it regularly. Warren Buffett is an expert in purchasing distressed or even bankrupt firms, which his conglomerate, Berkshire Hathaway, devours while they are weak. One of the wealthiest people in the United States has built his empire by investing in companies worth more than their stock value that are close to failure. He routinely fires and replaces the leaders of the businesses he acquires.

The stress reduction resulting from the support of group members curbs despotic leadership, as well as the leadership shortcomings displayed by Gareth, encouraging a greater feeling of unity against the cannibalistic aspects of survival (De Clercq, Azeem, Haq, & Bouck-enooghe, 2020).

Even Gareth's own brother served as food after being killed by order

of the leader for disobedience. Gareth does not tolerate any questioning of his authority. He considers that his decisions guarantee the survival of the group, and that questioning them jeopardizes the entire community (Bass & Bass, 2009). Gareth becomes an increasingly power-hungry, authoritarian leader, even with depraved, sadistic tendencies. For example, he tastes Bob's leg, telling him that he has nothing against him, and that, if it is any consolation, he tastes much better than he would have thought. There is also a strong suggestion that Gareth and his friends like eating babies and children. The monstrosity of their leader, who condones their most abject crimes, creates cohesion and solidarity within this group, united by the same history, practices, and values (García-Morales, Jiménez-Barrionuevo, & Gutiérrez-Gutiérrez, 2012). Cannibalism can be virtuous for businesses. In an interview with Forbes contributor and CEO of Leadx.org, Kevin Kruse, on 20 July 2017, the strategist Shawn Kanungo even advises leaders to "think like a cannibal to get ahead of the curve" and gives the example of Reed Hastings, the CEO of Netflix. At the time, the business model of the firm relied on DVDs and all the revenue was made by the DVD team until the CEO decided to "kick them out" of the main management meeting because they were not open to the idea of streaming. Kevin Kruse summarizes this approach as follows: "You really need to become a cannibal and realize you have to kill the most successful parts of your business with something better."

3.3. The megalomaniacal guru

Negan, played by American actor Jeffrey Dean Morgan, is the leader of the *Saviors*, an army of a hundred mercenaries responsible for looting and accumulating possessions for him. Negan, who appears in the Season 6 finale, *Last Day on Earth*, presents himself as the leader of the *New World Order*, which means giving him half of what you own or being killed. In exchange, Negan guarantees his followers' safety against rival gangs. Groups wishing to collaborate with the *Saviors* can agree to donate 50% of what they own, grow, or manufacture in exchange for protection. This authoritarian *New World Order*, which resembles slavery, contradicts Rick Grimes's ambition to offer his son Carl a livable future where everyone can be free, fulfilled, and safe. While Rick thought that *Alexandria* would become a haven, Negan will make it a prison. Negan hates opposition, and his revenge on Rick, who dared attack his men, is abominable, as he beats Rick's best friend to death with a baseball bat. Negan knows that Rick cannot stand losing control (Huczynski, 1992) and sees him as a potential rival. Rather than killing him, he prefers to humiliate him and show his power and domination over him and his friends. He takes the time to prove to Rick that he is no longer a leader and that he must submit to Negan's superior and authority.

Negan is a psychopathic tyrant who loves to make others suffer and who feeds on the hatred that others feel toward him. He is brutal and pitiless: the more he is opposed, the more he rages. He operates as the guru of a sect, with disciples who worship his personality and whose rallying cry is "*I am Negan.*" An instinctive visionary, Negan is unpredictable, with sudden mood swings when he loses all self-control. He is rational, but incoherent; although he says that rape is repugnant to him, he creates a harem of the spouses of members of his gang. His attitude is "do what I say, not what I do" because as the leader, he has the right to do what he wants (Locke, 1999). As he is able to anticipate and analyze his opponents' actions, he enjoys trapping them and then torturing them for as long as possible. However, Negan prefers not to kill his victims. As he says, "*I want you to work for me. You can't do that if you're dead.*" Management by cynical, brutal terror exists in some companies. Steve Jobs treated some employees appallingly at the beginning of his career and totally lacked empathy and consideration. Travis Kalanick, founder and former CEO of Uber, provides a recent example of such practices. He allegedly fostered a corporate culture in which harassment, humiliation, verbal abuse, and bullying were common. Even though he reacted by saying it was time for him to "change as a leader and grow up," his

combative, aggressive style comes naturally to him, and requires hard work and introspection to change. It did not prevent him from creating the most valuable start-up in the world.

Everything in Negan's appearance and attitude reflects his position as leader. He demonstrates his position through different physical dimensions, such as posture, gesture, clothing, accessories, language, tone, mimics, and physical intimidation (Ford, Harding, Gilmore, & Richardson, 2017). He also wants to feel, see, and hear that people fear him and submit to his will (Bathurst & Cain, 2013). This is why Negan threatens, humiliates and tortures Rick during their first encounter. He wants to see submission, and renunciation of leader status in his eyes. Despite Rick's words and promises, Negan does not believe in his allegiance, because he still sees material signs of his leadership.

One of Negan's main strengths is his persuasive power. He succeeds in making his leadership sacred, and therefore sustainable, with high development potential (Grint, 2010). The fact that his followers are called the *Saviors* and that their headquarters is called *The Sanctuary* is a direct reference to Christianity, underlining the religious aspect of Negan's leadership. Those who follow him are ready to make any sacrifice. The *Saviors* prefer to die rather than betray Negan, perhaps because they know it is more or less the same thing. Everyone tries to show that he is a good servant by collecting wealth and enlisting other people in the group. Negan knows how to punish, but he also knows how to reward those who are faithful to him by appointing them as generals of his army and by giving them a little power, just enough to ensure everyone obeys him. Many business leaders have become legendary, creating a magical, supernatural aura around them and have movies and series dedicated to them. Examples include Andrew Carnegie, Henry Ford, John Rockefeller, Walt Disney, Warren Buffett, Richard Branson, Gordon Moore, Michael Dell, Steve Jobs, Bill Gates, Mark Zuckerberg and Elon Musk. Leadership appears impossible to define and difficult to discuss, leading researchers to study the topic in unusual ways (Kets de Vries, 1994; Harding et al., 2011).

4. Paternalistic or maternalistic and protective leaders

Like Rick Grimes, some other leaders are willing to sacrifice everything, even their lives, to serve the community (Hunter, 2004). They do everything in their power to protect their communities and persuade them that the world is better than it really is. However, each has a different positive leadership style.

4.1. The sensitive and visionary leader

Deanna Monroe, played by American actor and singer Tovah Feldshuh, is a former Ohio member of Congress, who seems to have all the qualities of a leader. She is cognitively, socially, and emotionally intelligent, outgoing, driven, psychically and psychologically stable, kind, social and endowed with excellent problem-solving abilities (Zaar et al., 2019). She would agree with Larry Page, co-founder of Google and CEO of Alphabet Inc., who said in 2008 in The Economist that "solving big problems is easier than solving little problems". Similar to Page, Deanna is obsessed with detail and wants everything to be as perfect as possible; she wants everyone in Alexandria to flourish by doing what they do best with the fewest possible constraints. Brian Chesky also explained this idea in an interview for Vator.tv in 2011: "When you start a company, it's more an art than a science because it's totally unknown. Instead of solving high-profile problems, try to solve something that's deeply personal to you." Deanna Monroe's goal is not simply to try and survive in the face of the undead and hostile groups by remaining barricaded in her city. She aims to create a genuine, harmonious, autonomous community where each person thrives while serving the whole group.

When Rick Grimes's group arrives in *Alexandria*, Deanna summons each member for an individual interview. She explains to Rick Grimes that she has an exceptional gift for reading people (Gardner & Stough, 2002). Before the apocalypse, she considered becoming a professional

poker player. She seems to have the gift of detecting each person's talent and using it for everyone's benefit. She therefore helps her fellow citizens develop by inviting them to cooperate and trust each other in their respective fields (Lee, Gillespie, Mann, & Wearing, 2010). In an anarchic world, Deanna manages to establish a secure city with (1) fortifications and a well-stocked armory, (2) a system of solar panels for power, (3) the capacity to grow its own food and (4) an environment where all inhabitants seem to live peacefully, each playing their own role. She is courageous, determined, and ambitious in intimidating circumstances that lead others to despair (Champy & Nohria, 2001). Deanna knows how to recognize and foster expertise, and she is not reluctant to include new people and make alliances.

Authoritarian leadership is one of the components of the paternalistic leadership of Deanna, which overshadows the creativity of the members of the community, shifting between benevolence, morality, and intrinsic authoritarianism. The benevolent effect covers paternalistic and authoritarian actions, turning them into a positive aspect that mitigates negative paternalistic leadership (Gu, Hempel, & Yu, 2020).

Shortly after Rick's arrival, she offers to put him in charge of the city's security because she recognizes this talent in him: "*I told you I had a job for you. I'd like you to be our constable. That's what you were. That's what you are.*" Deanna Monroe is not afraid of competition or of losing power. She is aware of her weaknesses and seeks above all what is best for her community. She is ready to sacrifice herself for the good of *Alexandria* and to share her leadership with others. This behavior is similar to that of Larry Page and Sergey Brin when they appointed Eric Schmidt as CEO of Google and immediately considered him their equal because they thought it was best for their business.

Deanna is particularly humble and claims no glory for what she has achieved. Deanna's leadership resembles that of Ginni Rometty, CEO of IBM since 2012. They both have the ability to make difficult decisions, such as when IBM sold its emblematic server division, while inspiring cohesion and strong support from the members of their groups. They visualize the long-term future of their collective, make every possible effort and sacrifice everything to achieve their goals. To them, human capital and values provide the key to success and survival in a hostile environment. In an interview at the Most Powerful Women summit in 2011, Ginni Rometty explained the following: "When you don't believe in the inevitable, it means you don't expect that that's how things have to turn out. You can change them."

It is interesting to note that the character Deanna Monroe in the series *The Walking Dead* is called Douglas Monroe in the comic book. The TV show's producers and screenwriters thus chose to turn a male character into a strong woman and an enlightened leader (O'Toole, 2019). Rick Grimes learns a lot with Deanna, because he learns to trust others, to delegate and to make good use of people's talents (Hernandez et al., 2014; Lee et al., 2010; Murphy & Enderle, 1995). Deanna is one of the only characters in the series whom he obeys and respects. She prophesies to comfort and motivate Rick (Goleman et al., 2013), that one day the suffering he feels will become a positive, useful force in him. He realizes too late, after Deanna's death, that she was fighting for an attainable dream: "*Everything Deanna was talking about is possible. It's all possible. I see that now.*"

4.2. The messianic and holistic leader

King Ezekiel, whose subjects call him "Your Majesty" is one of the most eccentric yet realistic characters in *The Walking Dead*. He is the charismatic leader of the peaceful community called *The Kingdom*. However, King Ezekiel secretly negotiates the peace and tranquility of the group with Negan: *The Kingdom* provides the *Saviors* with food every week in exchange for their protection. King Ezekiel owes much of his leadership aura to Shiva, his domestic tigress. Before the apocalypse, Ezekiel was a zookeeper. When panic took over the population, the zoo's tigress ended up in a ditch, injured in one leg. Ezekiel took care of the tigress and saved her. Since then, they have become inseparable. A

personality cult and a kind of reverence thus developed around the leader and the impressive animal that protects him. His leadership can be seen and touched; it is visible and recognizable (Smolovic & Jackson, 2015). As he says, in a very Christlike phrase, "*I am king because I provided a light to lead my people forward in the darkness.*" Under his grandiloquent exterior, the humility of King Ezekiel who, as all his followers know, started from nothing, is the key to his leadership (Collinson & Tourish, 2015; Morris, Brotheridge, & Urbanski, 2005). Dennis Muilenburg, the CEO of Boeing, grew up on a farm in Iowa and started as an intern in the firm. Mary Barra, the first woman to become CEO of a major automaker, also began her career as an 18-year-old student apprentice at GM. These leaders' actions, paths and values speak for themselves, generate a mythical aura, encourage identification and inspire hope (Conger, 1991).

The people of *The Kingdom* are grateful to King Ezekiel for allowing them to live in a secure community where they are safe and have hope. He explains that he simply offered them what they needed the most, and that they look up to him, considering him almost a messiah (Kapur, 2009) and showing a willingness to follow him anywhere: "*People want someone to follow. It's human nature. They want someone to make them feel safe.*" They are immensely grateful to him. As one of his friends tells him before he dies: "*The world makes people crazy these days, but you created another world for us.*" King Ezekiel thus forges an identity as a creator, protector and guide of his people, who accept him as a leader and to whom he remains close (Waldman & Yammarino, 1999). Despite having the leadership aura of a real king and multiple kingly skills (Polelle, 2008), Ezekiel does not want to live apart from his people. He is with them in every battle and remains close to them. David Taylor tries to act in the same way as CEO of P&G, as he explained at the 2016 CEO Talent summit: "Part of what leaders have to do is not get overwhelmed by their title and experience and instead recognize that those closest to the consumer and the plants have the insights you need to really make the best decisions."

King Ezekiel exercises holistic leadership to manage strategy, resource management, operations and daily tasks, as well as the emotional and spiritual dimension of his community (Yang, Huang, & Wu, 2019). This form of leadership is based on strong staging and on the leader's exceptional personality (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). He is always positive and sends good energy to his people, even in the most terrifying situations. He attempts to explain this idea in Season 8, Episode 2, *The Damned*, when he asks Carol, "*Do I feel this supreme confidence, or is my lot, my job, simply to project such certainty?*" This assurance, whether real or feigned, has a positive impact on his followers, who it reassures and galvanizes in solidarity and communion with their king (Collinson & Tourish, 2015). Ezekiel's motto is "*fake it till you make it,*" meaning that even if something appears impossible, acting like it is will not help. Therefore, he always behaves like the group can accomplish anything, which is what happens most of the time. Elon Musk, CEO of SpaceX, does the same thing when he speaks with great confidence about travelling to Mars and living on this planet. In the beginning, everyone considered him unaware of the challenges involved, but now even NASA is working with him to make it possible.

King Ezekiel often expresses himself in parables and shows great wisdom, like a prophet. He teaches his visitors and gives them advice such as "*Hope is the North Star. Let it guide you*" or "*The pessimist looks down and hits his head. The optimist looks up and loses his footing. The realist looks forward and adjusts his path accordingly.*" This sustainable leadership, based on values, seems to be much more effective and resilient (Avery & Bergsteiner, 2011; Pearce et al., 2014) than the methods of the other leaders in the series. King Ezekiel believes that his destiny is to rebuild a new society and provide his people with somewhere to live. When the colonies unite to defeat Negan, he offers the following words to Maggie, who is pregnant: "*And on this day, we begin to reshape this world, for your child and the children to come.*" Numerous entrepreneurs have stated that they had been aware they were destined to become leaders since childhood. Their self-belief is strong, and they often speak

metaphorically. They express their desire to exert a positive impact on their environment and on society in general, much like Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, Elon Musk, Sergei Brin, Mark Zuckerberg, Richard Branson, Jack Ma, Reed Hastings and Jeff Weiner have done.

4.3. The spontaneous and dedicated leader

Jadis is the leader of the *Scavengers*, a group of survivors living in an open pit garbage dump. The *Scavengers* use everything they find in the landfill to meet their needs. They also attack those who pass nearby, stealing everything they have. They are unscrupulous looters and thieves. They take as little risk as possible and never act alone. The *Scavengers* have evolved to adapt to the new world. They make no unnecessary effort and communicate in very few words. They seem to have invented an effective language in which a look or a gesture is often enough to express an idea or a command. This example brings to mind how Mary Barra reduced General Motors' 10-page dress code to a simple "dress appropriately." She is direct and frank, empowers her employees and encourages them not to beat around the bush when they meet a problem. To her, messages should be as simple, precise and honest as possible.

The colony of the *Scavengers* thus functions like an anthill, with Jadis as the queen. The place where they live, a labyrinth in a dump, resembles an anthill, with many tunnels where they can hide and escape from their enemies. Their interactions are spontaneous, but coordinated and harmonious, and never seem to clash. When they capture someone, they force captives to hand over everything they have to save their life: "*We own your lives. You wanna buy them back?*" The *Scavengers* never question orders, to such an extent that it begs the question whether they have any free will left. In their greed and selfishness, they are aware that working together increases their chances of survival in a hostile environment (Appelo, 2011). This discipline and obedience may seem a great achievement, but it can also become a fatal weakness. The most resilient organizations are those that evolve and renew themselves thanks to constant questioning and self-criticism. When John Flannery became CEO of GE, he tried to create an environment in which employees could criticize and speak up about any problem or question they had to make the firm improve and become more agile.

Jadis is also a formidable negotiator, who demands that Rick accept her conditions ("*Say yes!*"), knowing that she will then betray him for Negan's protection and privileges, not because she finds him more pleasant or feels closer to him but simply because he can offer her much more in exchange. She takes care of the members of her group, who appear to be extensions of herself, like organs that are part of the same body. Indeed, the *Scavengers* are united by the same vision and the same goal: to take minimum risks and cooperate to maximize their chances of surviving the apocalypse (Buchanan & Hällgren, 2019). Cooperation, cohesion, and unity guarantee better protection for everyone. The role of Jadis as a leader is to strengthen this team spirit and to stimulate commitment and synergy within the group (Datt & Gopalakrishna, 2013). Industrial leaders such as Mary Barra from GM, David Taylor from P&G and Dennis Muilenburg from Boeing value collaborative efforts greatly.

5. Discussion, contributions, and limitations

Although zombies have yet to appear, the comparison of the COVID-19 crisis with *The Walking Dead* series is illustrative. The strong characters of the series span the full range of leaders with vastly contrasting styles: ethical, sensitive, visionary, antagonistic, authoritarian, megalomaniacal, paternalistic, protective, and messianic. The series can provide insight into virtuous and vicious practices in a hostile environment.

5.1. Discussion

This research shows that a serious crisis radically changes the established order and that leadership is not necessarily found where expected. Someone who was a good leader before the crisis may prove terrible during it. Conversely, someone who was not inclined to be a leader before the crisis may rise to the occasion, becoming a successful leader in the midst of chaos. One of Rick Grimes's biggest achievements is to have trained leaders and produced leadership at all levels of his group and to have helped make leaders out of those who did not seem to have the necessary qualities at the beginning of the adventure (Denis, Langley, & Sergi, 2012; Goleman et al., 2013). This is the case with Carol Peletier, played by Melissa McBride. Carol is one of the most interesting and most well-loved characters in the entire series because of her gradual but radical evolution from submissive and abused woman to strong and independent fighter. She is initially perceived as weak but progressively reveals herself as the strongest character in the show (Meister, Sinclair, & Jehn, 2017).

This transformation is largely due to the influence of Rick, whose group she joins at the beginning of the series and who encourages her to become a true warrior. She manages to defeat Terminus's troops virtually alone to save her fellow survivors, who have been captured and are about to be devoured. In times of crisis, it is essential to be able to count on everyone and to know that each member of the team can excel and go beyond their limits. Carol is the embodiment of the idea that leadership has little to do with charisma and is not reserved for the elites, the elected or those who have been privileged by birth or position (Bligh & Kohles, 2009).

In *The Walking Dead*, as in modern businesses, many have the potential to become leaders even if they initially lack the necessary qualities. Under this approach, leadership is a process that allows individuals to become leaders and evolve into this role. This approach is in contrast to a more classical view, where this ability is believed to be a stable state associated with a specific mission. Sometimes, people must become leaders to prevent hostile others from playing this role or to protect their threatened businesses when no-one else seems able to do so. For Carol, like Rick, the biggest danger in the post-apocalyptic world is to be weak or to become weak again. This prospect is undoubtedly why Carol tries not to let her emotions guide her decisions and why she becomes a cold and austere character. She does not seek to be popular but to do what needs to be done without regrets or qualms. As she explains, "You do not have to like what I did, just accept it." This type of argument is often used to justify a difficult business decision, such as a social plan or the closure of a site (Lord, Gatti, & Chui, 2016).

Leadership goes far beyond charisma and skills. It involves deep motivations and sincere emotions (Jackson & Parry, 2011; Kapur, 2009). Leadership is accessible to everyone: even the weakest person can learn to become a leader, as illustrated by the case of Carol Peletier in *The Walking Dead*. Several characters who initially lack leadership qualities, such as The Governor and King Ezekiel, become effective leaders almost unwillingly by force of circumstance. Often, the most improbable leaders become the best. Even when they do not really have the potential to lead or are unable to acquire the skills to do so, they develop the ability to create an illusion and convey the image of a leader, like Gregory. All these leaders follow a progressive psychological and physical transformation to act, look like and project the identity of a leader (Ford et al., 2017).

One of the most interesting aspects of this study is the examination of how leaders evolve over time, building their identity and relationships with others, reacting to unpredictable events and behaving in an unstable, threatening environment (Smith, Haslam, & Nielsen, 2018). Each of these leaders has both a bright side and a dark side, or an ethical and a non-ethical one (Howell & Avolio, 1992). The balance between these two facets can sometimes change radically, with some good leaders becoming bad and some bad leaders acting with integrity (Kociatkiewicz & Kostera, 2012). This approach enriches the literature, which generally

favors the myth of the perfect, heroic, charismatic, courageous, benevolent, and gentle leader (Rego, Pena e Cunha, & Clegg, 2012). As certain scholars have noted, "the literature is less forthcoming about the ignorance, manipulation, corruption, and divisive behavior of organizational members; or the ways in which individuals in leadership roles might confuse, undermine, and dominate others" (Vince & Mazen, 2014, p. 190).

5.2. Contributions: Lessons for leaders in the COVID-19 context

World leaders advocate joining forces, like Rick and Deanna, to learn from the COVID-19 crisis by developing an agreement for future pandemics. As proposed by the Director General of the World Health Organization, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, this agreement would enforce and enable collaboration instead of individual action. The reaction to COVID-19 of denialist leaders such as Donald Trump in the United States and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil has led to negligence, much like King Ezekiel. To use the metaphor of *The Walking Dead* in relation to leadership styles, they are rooted in low-intensity contexts where the aim is to support followers. However, true managerial leadership occurs in high-intensity organizations (Stone & Jawahar, 2021). Narcissistic leadership by unethical leaders, such as Gareth and Negan, exerts an influence in silencing collaborators by nullifying the relationship (Hamstra, Schreurs, Jawahar, Laurijssen, & Hünermund, 2021). Transformational leadership, such as that employed by Rick, translates into frugal innovation processes (Lei, Gui, & Le, 2021), which lead to successful outcomes through the sharing of tacit and explicit knowledge.

The COVID-19 crisis has also created opportunities for leadership to develop in all areas, including the workplace, family, politics, and healthcare. This leadership is built on trust and a sense of shared social identity with followers (Van Bavel et al., 2020). Ethical leaders such as Rick Grimes have been called for in companies to face the devastating consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. These calls have led to a shift in the manufacturing approaches of companies such as General Motors. Led by its CEO Mary Barra, General Motors has built an association with a medical company that manufactures respirators. Likewise, the Ford Motor Company, under CEO Jim Farley, has moved toward the construction of ventilators. However, in the political landscape, the initial focus on economy over health has been inverted, with a subsequent focus on health-related actions over economic measures. The speed of vaccination in Israel has been made possible thanks to excellent logistics and information, which has reached the population through centralized leadership. The paternalistic leadership of those in government, in a visionary and messianic sense, has given peace of mind to those affected (Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008).

A crisis like COVID-19 is a time of disorientation where people seek explanations, culprits and solutions. Some usurping leaders take the opportunity to give ready-made answers to the questions everyone is asking. One of the main strengths of Negan is his power of persuasion. He is a visionary, proselytizing leader (Westley & Mintzberg, 1989) who succeeds in making his power sacred and therefore more sustainable and capable of development (Grint, 2010). The fact that his followers are called *Saviors* and that their headquarters are *The Sanctuary* is a direct reference to Christianity and underlines the religious aspect of Negan's leadership. However, Negan is a false prophet who leads his people to disaster, failure, and death. He epitomizes the power of fake news, which has propagated at breakneck speed and has fractured society since the start of the pandemic.

Some characters of *The Walking Dead* have become leaders through a combination of circumstances beyond their control. Whether benevolent or malicious, they are out of place, and they play their part only because the context requires them to do so. These unintentional leaders rarely keep their position for long, either because they prefer to give it up or because others who covet it take their spot. Such leaders are dangerous because they occupy a position with huge responsibility but are incompetent and unable to protect the community. Some leaders before

the COVID-19 crisis held positions for political reasons and only had to deal with administrative or management issues. As the world tumbled into an unprecedented, life-threatening pandemic, these leaders were shown to fall short. Such leaders must be replaced quickly, regardless of the diplomatic or communication-related implications.

6. Research limitations

Imaginization stems from the idea that all management theories are based on metaphors, explicit or implicit. These metaphors help us appropriate abstract theories. However, the process of imaginization relies on analogies and metaphors that evoke reality, while not actually being reality. While metaphors can provide a better understanding, stimulate reflection, and inspire solutions, they also distort situations, uses, practices, relationships, skills, problems, and solutions. They can focus attention on certain issues, thus diverting it from other difficulties, which may be overlooked.

In the context of leadership in times of crisis, the comparison of the global pandemic caused by the COVID-19 coronavirus with the virus that turns humans into zombies in *The Walking Dead* has certain parallels, even though the situation depicted in the TV series is fortunately much more extreme and apocalyptic than real life. The characters presented as the heroes therefore behave exceptionally and demonstrate extraordinary qualities, although the writers of the series are careful not to adopt an overly Manichean approach. The behavioral drifts and perversions of some of the other leaders in the series are therefore also quite extreme. This reading grid of the leaders of the series is thus useful for interpreting, understanding, and guiding the behavior of business leaders. However, it does not reflect a strict correspondence between them.

7. Conclusions

This analysis of leadership styles in *The Walking Dead* reveals three types of leaders: heroic and supportive, dominant, and directive, and paternalistic and protective. All these leaders have unique characteristics, knowledge, behavior, sensitivity, and goals. The study of these archetypal leaders reveals that they all have a different type of charisma that defines the way they exercise their leadership: heroic charisma in the case of Rick Grimes and Carol Peletier (Grund, 1996), missionary charisma in the case of The Governor and Negan, majestic charisma in the case of King Ezekiel and Jadis, paternalistic charisma in the case of Hershel Greene, and maternalistic charisma in the case of Deanna Monroe (Steyrer, 1998).

A successful leader does not necessarily have to be strong or make all the important decisions (Brown, 2015). Some gentle, caring leaders have proved much more efficient and better appreciated by their followers, who expect them not only to be competent but also to demonstrate moral leadership (Bolden & Gosling, 2006; Munro & Thanem, 2018). However, even though "leaders are often cast in black and white terms as either saints or devils" (Gabriel, 2015, p. 316), this study shows that every leader can behave like a saint or a devil depending on the situation and what is at stake.

The Walking Dead also contrasts centralized leadership, exemplified by The Governor and Negan, with distributed leadership, practiced by Rick Grimes and Deanna Monroe. Both prove efficient, but their achievement is due to "three elements of the sacred: the separation between leaders and followers, the sacrifice of leaders and followers, and the way leaders silence the anxiety and resistance of followers" (Grint, 2010, p. 89). All the major leaders in *The Walking Dead* have these characteristics, even if it is manifested in profoundly different ways. The leader is presented as a superior being to whom one is indebted and who acts as a guide, a healer, and a soother. Even when Rick keeps repeating, "*This is not about me*" in the first episode of Season 8, *Mercy*, everyone looks to him for instructions. Everyone is engaged in the battle against Negan because they believe in Rick, with his rallying

yet comforting words. Mary Barra, chairperson and CEO of General Motors, makes the same point when she says that her main concern is employees and customers, not her own career. On his first day as CEO of GE, John Flannery wrote a letter to all employees with the same message, emphasizing his desire to remain humble and foster transparency and candor (Salas-Vallina, Alegre, & López-Cabrales, 2020).

As Rick Grimes does successfully, it is important to adapt the leadership style to the context and to develop specific relationships for different situations (Goleman et al., 2013). Leadership is the art of driving change and the search for a balance between leader and followers (Munro & Thanem, 2018). Leadership is a form of collective resilience and the ability to adapt in the face of environmental instability (Southwick, Martini, Charney, & Southwick, 2016), which Gareth and Jadis do well in the series. Leaders must be able to step back if they consider that they are not in the best position to lead the group in a particular context, as Deanna does with Rick. This step back does not threaten their role but shows lucidity, self-confidence, and his trust in the team (Lee et al., 2010).

Good leaders know how to strike the right balance between consultation and taking the initiative. They realize when it is important to consider followers' opinions, and they are capable of going against their own will or interest. They train other leaders and regularly delegate important missions to them without feeling threatened (MacBeath, 2005). However, they can also take responsibility, do not hesitate to make decisions alone on behalf of the collective and can even be authoritarian when the context requires (Pearce et al., 2014).

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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