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Doctor of Business Administration

Organisational Learning of a Small Firm During Crises and Uncertainty: A Case of
AMYQ

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By

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ABSTRACT

Although crisis and risk management are widely researched, their impact on small firms, especially those in emerging economies such as Nigeria, has not been fully covered. One of the essential characteristics of small firms is that they are managed by their owners (owner-managers), and these owners have enormous power and decision-making ability. The high failure rate of these small companies can be attributed to poor management, especially during the crises and uncertainty prevalent in the increasingly complex and ever-changing business environment in Nigeria. The purpose of this study is to detail my journey as an owner-manager of a small firm as I navigate some commercial and operational issues which have threatened my business. These problems are what I have termed 'crisis and uncertainty'. This research is carried out within a small firm, AMYQ Ventures Limited, by the owner-manager and researcher, Uchenna Joseph Ekeabu. This thesis uses an action-learning research approach and relies on the interpretive paradigm. Action learning (AL) research was appropriate for this project due to its collaborative and reflexive process, which leads to the use of quick interventions and evaluation of actions taken while the research is on-going. It is suitable for small firms and enables collaboration and employees' learning about the problems and development of a deeper understanding, which will result in actions that are relevant to the organisation. Research data were collected through analysis of the literature reviewed, observation, interviews, 360-degree ratings of me as the owner-manager by my employees, and the use of an AL set made up of 10 employees. Methodological triangulation of data collection using interviews, observation, and questionnaires improved the quality and integrity of the findings. Observations were carried out on a day-to-day basis while employees were going about their daily work schedules. Phase 1 of the methodology design was the 360-degree evaluation of the leadership of AMYQ. This was followed by interviews with 14 members of staff, using the research questions as a model in designing the questionnaire. The third phase involved setting up the AL set of 10 employees who were willing to join the set. The third phase enabled me to take action based on the outcomes of the action-learning set deliberations and suggestions. The leadership competencies identified as appropriate actions of the owner-manager include the use of effective communication, risk-taking, appropriate decision-making, and promotion of resilience and learning within the organisation. Appropriate

communication was used as a way of motivation and improving the understanding of the employees concerning the crisis being faced by the organisation. This led to employees' emotional and psychological support of the change management decisions. The risk-taking attitude of the owner-manager should be such that the firm is able to view crises not only as threats but also as sources of opportunities. Effective decision-making was crucial during this phase of the crisis and was used to shape the direction of new policies and procedures. Resilience and learning were equally important competencies that owner-managers must be aware of and use to improve their ability to survive any future crises and learn from experience. I utilised these competencies and decisions in collaboration with the employees to reduce the effects of the crisis being faced, thus leading to the survival of the firm. Concrete actions taken, as suggested by the AL set, included the use of debt collectors to improve cash flow, cooperating and forming alliances with competitors to improve sales, payment of salaries, and use of sanctions to reduce absenteeism. It is recommended that further research be done using other small firms in other phases of the crisis cycle. Also, it will be essential to develop a business continuity plan template for small firms in Nigeria. Practical theories of organisational learning and resilience should be researched using small firms in other geographical areas of Nigeria and other sectors of the economy.

Keywords: Crisis leadership, small business, owner-manager, action learning, operational and commercial problems, crisis, and uncertainty

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Declaration

I hereby certify that this Thesis constitutes my work, that where the language of others is set forth, quotation marks so indicate, and that appropriate credit is given where I have used the language, ideas, expressions, or writings of another. I declare that the Thesis describes original work that has not previously been presented for the award of any other degree of any institution.

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Chapter 1**Introduction****1. Background, Context, and Purpose of the Study****1.1 Background to the Study**

Crises and uncertainties in any system are known to often produce negative, undesirable, and debilitating consequences for individuals and entities alike in any society. This is true of business organisations, especially when these are small firms and enterprises with limited resources. During crises and uncertainties, small business organisations may face different challenges such as dire fiscal constraints, scarcity of resources, and operational difficulties. Such challenges may lead to the organisation's inability to meet its internal and external obligations. For example, small businesses with limited resources are more likely to default and be unable to service their repayment obligations to lending banks and institutions, remunerate their employees adequately, and meet the company's demand and supply needs. Other issues may include the business organisations being unable to satisfy their clientele's demands, reduced performance levels, poor business turnover, lack of motivation among employees, and high employee attrition rates.

Crises and uncertainties, as described here, can result from several factors, including, but not limited to, social, economic, political, environmental, and geo-natural occurrences. They can also be caused by internally driven circumstances such as inefficient administrative set-ups, poor decision-making mechanisms, and other forms of managerial shortcomings on the part of the ownership, management, or leadership of the small firms in question. Similarly, the lack of adequate training and proper knowledge of how to run a given type of business could also lead to some form of crisis and uncertainty. The lack of clear, distinct setting-out of operational procedures, or the deliberate or inadvertent deviation from such procedures by employees, might also lead to crises and uncertainties developing in an organisation (Erdem and Erdem, 2011). Capital squeeze and lack of essential resources can also contribute to the emergence of crises and uncertainties in the life of a small business firm. While some crises can be foreseen, others might be abrupt. The foregoing insights align with the opinion of Fener and Cevik (2015) that rapid organisational changes, changing

economic conditions, employee-related problems, political effects, and unexpected technological changes are major causes of crises, instability, and uncertainty in today's business environment.

These issues notwithstanding, however, it could be argued that effective, efficient, and strategic organisational leadership of small business firms during periods of crises and uncertainty can determine the difference between the survival and profitability and the collapse of the small businesses in question. Against this background, this study attempted to investigate the organisational leadership dynamics of a small firm during crises and uncertainty. The study's fundamental assumption is that although financial and commercial management factors may often appear to play major roles in bringing about some of the major challenges faced by most small organisations, the significance of strategic, effective, and efficient organisational leadership structures and practices in firms cannot be overemphasised. This is because the organisational assets available to businesses, namely financial, commercial, human, physical, and material resources, may not in themselves add much business, economic and strategic value unless they are properly harnessed and applied by the organisation: that is to say, the leadership and the people in that organisation. Hence, my focus was on organisational leadership in a small firm in times of crises and uncertainty.

1.2 Contextualisation, Justification, and Rationale for the Study

Four contextual approaches and bases justify the focus of this research on organisational leadership of a small firm in times of crises and uncertainty. First, there exists ample research and theoretical analysis on the correlation between effective organisational leadership and crises and uncertainty in organisations. Second, the practical context suggests that existential leadership issues within the organisation on a day-to-day basis might have played some roles in the emergence of crises and uncertainty in the small firm. The third is the personal context, and this highlighted that as the owner-manager of the small firm, I might have recognised that some of my leadership roles could have probably either triggered or resolved some of the circumstances that gave rise to the crisis. The fourth approach considers the organisational context of AMYQ Ventures as a small firm.

1.2.1 Theoretical and Research Context

A consistent and significant body of research and literature correlating leadership to business successes and failures has continued to emerge. Although most problems encountered by businesses seem to portray financial, commercial, and sometimes technical overtones, many researchers point to significant links between organisational leadership responsibilities and business outcomes. Adegunle (2017) found that business success depends on the effectiveness of the business leaders in their roles and ethical practices as perceived by their followers. In most developing countries, including Nigeria, ineffective organisational leadership, lack of organisational vision, and a demotivated and uninspired workforce have been cited as key causes of business failures (Mahdinezhad et al., 2013). These insights are relevant to this study because the correlation and interconnectivity between effective organisational leadership, clarity of organisational vision, demotivated employees, and the problems encountered by the business underscore the great value and importance of the leadership tasks of the owner-manager and researcher. Studying the organisational leadership of a small firm – AMYQ Ventures Limited – with which I am directly associated, during crises and uncertainty, demonstrates the apparent pervasive and overarching value that effective leadership brings to small business entities in crises. As Meraku (2017) suggested, most of the current crises in the world are not financial crises but crises of decision-making, which itself is a leadership function. Hao and Yazdanifard (2015) concluded that effective leadership not only affects but drives other critical components, such as trust, culture, and clear vision, which are necessary for change and success in organisations.

1.2.2 The Practical Context of a Small Firm, Owner-Manager, and Crisis Leadership

AMYQ Ventures Limited is a small firm of 15 employees located in Lagos, Nigeria. The company has faced multiple problems, including poor liquidity, increased staff absenteeism, low sales of agro-inputs, unpaid invoices, non-payment of staff salaries, employee demotivation, and an apparent lack of job satisfaction. Nigeria's unstable economy and ever-changing business climate have meant that the company is currently undergoing a protracted period of crisis and uncertainty. If unabated, this might lead to its collapse. The company thus requires appropriate crisis leadership competencies to tackle its existential problems.

Small firms play vital roles in developing economies such as Nigeria's. These are mostly associated with economic development and poverty reduction. They include single artisans who fabricate agricultural implements for villagers, street corner shops, barbershops, internet cafés, and small sophisticated finance and engineering firms. This cadre also includes medium-sized producers of automotive parts and dealers of agricultural inputs used for farming (OECD, 2014). The Federal Government of Nigeria has shifted attention towards small firms, as these firms can have a positive catalytic impact on the economic growth of the country (Igwe, 2016; Igwe, Onjewu and Nwibo, 2018). This could be seen in the increasing role of the Bank of Industry (BOI) towards projecting and sustaining small firms. The survival of these small firms is therefore essential to both the government and their owners (Ghosh et al., 2001; Parry et al., 2012).

Notwithstanding the government's support, the ever-changing socio-political, economic, and business conditions in Nigeria make it difficult for small firms such as AMYQ Ventures Limited to survive or withstand internal and external pressures, crises, and uncertainties. Financial constraints are driven by factors such as very high interest rates, weakened or non-existent soft and hard infrastructure, high debt portfolios, poor regulation of sectors, lack of leadership, managerial and management experience, demotivated employees, and poor record-keeping. Most of these factors are affecting AMYQ Ventures and have made it challenging for the firm to meet objectives and make returns to stakeholders and to me as the owner. This is neatly aligned with the OECD (1997), and Liu and Saleh's (2009) position, that small and medium enterprises (SMEs) typically have a failure rate of over 60% within the first five years of business operation. These small firms face an uncertain business environment and critical issues that must be navigated and managed for their survival and growth.

The failure rate of small firms is high in Nigeria due to their owner-managers' lack of experience, poor educational and professional background, and poor decision-making (Gumel, 2017), amongst other factors. Gbandi and Amissah (2014) suggested that lack of access to long-term capital is a major cause of small business failure in Nigeria. Loecher (2000) posited that most owner-managers of small firms assume leadership and decision-

making roles in their organisations on a day-to-day basis. Critically, then, the survival of these small firms depends on the quality of owner-manager leadership (Teng, Bhatia, and Anwar, 2011; Valdiserri and Wilson, 2010). These failures are related to poor management of crises and uncertainties faced by the firms. Hence, this is a practical and existential problem that small business owners and owner-managers must study in order to provide appropriate leadership strategies that will improve their leadership skills and competencies. These studies have raised more concerns about my own decision-making and leadership.

Managing and directing businesses during ordinary times differs from leading, managing, and directing the same businesses during crises and uncertainty. For small firms, crisis events can be threatening. This implies that crisis leadership matters, since crisis events are inevitable (James and Wooten, 2010). Although crises are inevitable, some can be avoided, while others can be managed in such a manner that their effects are reduced. Owner-managers must thus develop skills relevant to managing their businesses during times of crises and uncertainties. Such crisis leadership skills allow for a shift in thinking before and during crises. As James and Wooten (2010) asserted, it is a frame of mind that guides the leader's behaviour in a manner that opens opportunities for business owners. This thesis attempts to underpin the importance of small firm leaders communicating and learning from the context of crisis. In so doing, owner-managers can negotiate their companies out of the crises, while taking advantage of opportunities that may exist during such crises.

1.2.3 The Personal Context: Leadership and Managerial Skills of a Banker

My first professional career was as a bank employee in one of Nigeria's major commercial banking institutions in 1997. This was immediately after I graduated from the Federal University of Technology, Owerri (FUTO), Imo State, Nigeria. This period was important for two reasons. First, many financial institutions acquired commercial banking licenses from the Nigerian Central Bank (CBN). This led to some level of proliferation, with several banks having weak liquidity/asset bases. It could also be suggested that this proliferation brought about a significant rise in the employee base of Nigeria's financial services sector. Second, the period preceded the CBN-driven banks merger and consolidation reform project of 2004 – 2005. This was "... the process of reducing the number of banks and other deposit-taking institutions with a simultaneous increase in the size, concentration, and

efficiency of the remaining entities in the sector” (Bello, 2005, p. 46). Consequently, while this reform exercise enhanced the resilience profile of banks in the country, the number of deposit money banks in Nigeria decreased from its pre-2004 total of 89 banks to just 25. Many employees in the sector lost their jobs because of the consolidation. As a bank employee, I, like most others at the time, was exposed to some degree of apprehension as we collectively experienced crises and uncertainty in the industry, which had huge potential to affect our employment and livelihood.

Typical of banking sector standards, upon employment, I was groomed to dress well and be honest. I received various banking training, and my supervisors promoted integrity, professionalism, and customer-centric service orientation for the interest of the clients. They showed and taught me to be ‘hard’, decisive, but fair when taking decisions, especially when dealing with subordinates. Aspects of this leadership style could be perceived as autocratic. For example, managers were not required to seek the input of subordinates in the decision-making dynamics of everyday business operations. Managers ‘knew it all’, and their decisions carried enormous weight. Queries and sanctions for the errant behaviour of staff were easily the preferred means of resolving errors within the system. I grew to internalize these managerial tenets and was rewarded occasionally with promotions. Management as a career banker supported the use of active listening skills. One must listen attentively to one’s supervisors and judiciously follow the ‘holy bible’ of the bank, called the ‘Standard Operating Procedure’ (SOP). The SOP covered all the activities and processes of the bank. It stated the step-by-step ways, means, and methods of doing things. In a way, the SOP was part of management. It was not to be questioned, and actions that did not follow the SOP were met with sanctions and queries. The essence of the SOP was to ensure that bank employees were neither arbitrary in conducting the official banking business nor deviated from acceptable ethical and professional standards.

In a banking career that lasted 13 years, I worked for two commercial banks before leaving the industry to establish my own company, AMYQ Ventures Limited, in 2009. During this period, I registered as a student of the foremost accounting body in Nigeria: the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Nigeria (ICAN). I successfully completed my ICAN exams through rigorous self-study and attendance of approved ICAN training and workshops. I

therefore became a chartered accountant and associate of ICAN in 2005. In addition, I worked and gained huge professional exposure and cognate experiences in different functional, leadership, and managerial roles in these two financial institutions: Diamond Bank (1997-2000) and Bank PHB (2000-2009). For example, in the first three years of my employment, from 1997, I was a credit and marketing officer. I was subsequently assigned the role of a cash and teller officer, and later, a customer service officer. I subsequently joined the second bank, where I was appointed the pioneer cash officer of the bank in the year 2000 for two years. As the bank grew and expanded its business operations, I was appointed a branch service manager: a role I held for five years.

It is important to note that the core duties associated with this office included the successful setting up and establishment of new branches for the bank's growing operations. This involved negotiating for assets, the acquisition of operational equipment, supply-chain operations such as liaising with contractors and suppliers, and critically, ensuring that the guidelines and requirements of the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) and other regulatory agencies were met. In 2007, I was appointed to the role of Bank PHB's Head of Domestic Operations at the bank's head office in Nigeria's main commercial city of Lagos. The appointment was based on my previous excellent performance and my qualification as a chartered accountant. My role in the bank's operations was significant and sensitive, as it involved the processing of all management transactions and operations. It is equally important to note that an essential part of my career and employment in the bank was to undergo periodic statutory strategic management and leadership training, which was additional to other specialised training specific to the given roles I occupied. However, 2009 marked a major turning point, as I voluntarily resigned from my appointment with the bank to fully focus on building and managing my own company and business.

Before my resignation, I headed a team of ten staff members directly, and over sixty other employees indirectly. I reported directly to the Vice President of Operations and sometimes took orders directly from the managing director and executive directors. Heading the domestic operations of the bank improved my leadership and managerial capabilities. Meeting timelines, controlling bank-wide expenses, timely payment of supplier invoices, rendition of various returns to the government and its agencies, managing branch requests,

and making adequate reports to management formed my major job description. All the activities highlighted had to be done in line with the SOP. On some occasions when the SOP had to be revised or updated, managers and senior staff of the bank undertook the task and sent it to the managing director for approval. The junior staff of the bank had no input. Their job was to follow the SOP. Mine was to ensure that the SOP was always followed.

1.2.4 Introduction of AMYQ Ventures Limited (AMYQ)

AMYQ Ventures Limited, also called AMYQ, is a limited liability company and was incorporated in 2001 by the Corporate Affairs Commission of Nigeria while I was still working in the bank. It had three directors/shareholders, namely my wife, my daughter, and me. The shareholding at the time of incorporation was 30%, 10%, and 60% respectively. They were there to meet regulatory requirements. I took all the decisions about running the business and only shared my business issues with my wife when I wanted to. My wife and daughter were merely passive shareholders and never interfered with my business. AMYQ started with four employees, one of them being a family member (my brother-in-law).

AMYQ's first main line of business was in the marketing and distribution of petroleum products in Lagos State and its environs. It started operations in 2009 when I left my banking job. The focus on the marketing and distribution of petroleum products did not last long, as I found it difficult to cope with the high cost of the products, poor road network, truancy of truck drivers, and the constant breakdown of my trucks. In addition, there was high adulteration of petroleum products by the competition and I found it unacceptable to deal with such indecent acts. In 2010, I started selling fertiliser and other agro-inputs with the support of one of my friends, whom I had met in the Bank as a customer. He owned Tak Agro and was a major player in the manufacture of fertiliser in Nigeria. With his support and the Federal Government's focus on diversifying the Nigerian economy to agriculture, I saw the need to shift my business to selling agro-inputs, especially fertiliser. As of the time of writing this thesis, our staff strength has grown to 15, with four of these employees being members of my family.

1.2.5 AMYQ Ventures Limited: Organisational Context

AMYQ Ventures Limited is a small company involved in agro-dealership in Nigeria. AMYQ Ventures markets, sells, and distributes agro-related products like fertilisers and agricultural chemicals. The company has participated in the Federal Government's Growth Enhancement Support Scheme (GESS) for 2 years, 2013 and 2014. This programme was instituted to provide subsidised fertiliser and other agro-inputs to farmers to improve agricultural production, enhance food security and facilitate poverty reduction across the country (ADB, 2013). However, the company is currently faced with poor liquidity. This has been mostly caused by the continuous non-payment by the government for the 2014 GESS programme. The change in government and other exigent political factors in Nigeria seem to have led to changes and inconsistencies in government policies on agriculture. The current federal government administration has paused the program in 2015. We continue to wait for the program to be restarted. Poor governance, poor planning and implementation of projects, misplacement of priorities, and critically, corruption caused significant concerns about the programme's success (Tiri, Ogoh, and Ekpa, 2017).

The GESS Program contributed over 80% of AMYQ's revenue. With the non-payment by the government, the company became indebted to Skye Bank, one of its principal lenders, for over 100m Naira (approximately USD 160,000), and currently has not paid staff salaries for over six months. Employee morale and motivation appear to be very low. There has been a high employee turnover because of this. AMYQ also has uncollected receivables from its customers. The company's revenue has dropped sharply and it has experienced huge losses since 2014, with a poor revenue of less than N 3m (USD 18,750) year on year since 2015. The devaluation of the Naira – Nigeria's unit of currency – by over 150% has also impacted on the high cost of fertiliser in the market. Hence, the company, AMYQ Ventures, is facing an uncertain future in an environment full of business crises. The management is desirous of generating new businesses and income lines while demanding the payment of its invoices by the federal government. Since most of the business evaluations, decisions, and transactions that resulted in this current situation were made under my leadership as the owner-manager, this study provides an avenue for the action learning sets under my guidance to solve these management and financial problems within the company. This is because action learning research involves individuals taking actions to learn, improve their

own practices, and critically, add to the knowledge economy of their professional worlds (Coghlan and Pedler, 2006).

This action learning project will promote three levels of learning. Participants will learn together while they interact, understand, and resolve the company's issues. They will develop personally and professionally. In addition, I will also learn about myself and my leadership competencies and challenges, the employees, and the organisation. The final level of learning is that of the organisation. AMYQ Ventures Limited will benefit from the actions taken, and these will form an adaptable experience which will be useful in future and could contribute towards organisational resilience.

1.3 Transitioning from Bank Employment to Owner-Manager of a Small Firm: Corporate Management Practices vis-à-vis Management Inadequacies for a Small Business Firm

The trainings I received in the banking industry and my desire to become an entrepreneur, to build, own, and manage my own business ventures, motivated me towards resigning and creating a small-scale business entity – AMYQ Ventures Limited. It can be deduced from the scope of my roles and responsibilities as an employee of two commercial banks, over a period of 13 years, that I acquired considerable managerial experience, in addition to my in-service leadership and management training. Furthermore, it can be noted that although AMYQ Ventures Limited was registered and incorporated as a business entity with the Corporate Affairs Commission in 2001, its active operations started after I resigned in 2009. Equally, the company's initial business focus was logistics-related. This is because my pre-operation feasibility studies pointed to significant potential in Nigeria's supply chain and logistic industry, with particular attention to the transportation and marketing of petroleum products (kerosene, petrol, and diesel) across the country. Notwithstanding the foreseen huge potential in this sector, this aspect of AMYQ Ventures Limited's operations was short-lived due to a lack of adequate capital to compete with major players in that industry. Along with the above were challenges associated with the poor state of infrastructure in the country. This adversely affected delivery targets, while simultaneously increasing operational costs.

An important aspect of this study was to understand how decision-making and execution of business plans and projections within the company affected short, medium, and long-term business outcomes. Pavett and Lau (cited in Hayton, 2015) have investigated what managers do, and how their knowledge and skills influence personal and organisational outcomes. For example, were business decisions at AMYQ Ventures' leadership and managerial levels responsible for undesirable outcomes by adversely affecting business relationships with suppliers, lenders, clients, and employees alike? While my leadership and managerial skills and competencies were influenced and shaped within a systematised corporate banking sector, studies have shown that the SME sector is very diverse, and hence, different leadership skill-sets, managerial competencies and management practices most relevant to individual businesses may significantly vary according to the nature of the business and the context in which it operates (Hayton, 2015). My aptitudes and learnings from corporate management, managerial and leadership skills as a former bank employee might have been susceptible to gaps in certain specific skill-sets necessary for the successful management and leadership of my small business firm – -AMYQ. As Hayton (2015) further affirmed, extant studies have highlighted that some additional dimensions of skills are particularly relevant to the SME sector and context. This study therefore sought to establish, among other things, whether there were leadership knowledge deficiencies on my part in the management of AMYQ Ventures Limited. It equally sought to underscore the presence of any moderating influence of external integration on my leadership competencies and managerial skill-set, and whether this affected the success (Tehseen and Ramayah, 2015) of AMYQ Ventures Limited as a small business enterprise.

1.4 Leadership Solutions for Commercial and Financial Problems in a Small Firm

Research works on leadership in organisations in times of crisis by Abrams (2020), McNulty and Marcus (2020), and Nichols, Hayden and Trendler (2020), all supported the assumption that effective and strategic leadership practices, approaches, and disposition, rather than other forms of resources, are what matters most as building blocks for organisational success in times of crises and uncertainty. According to Abrams (2020), “leaders who communicate effectively and learn from their mistakes are poised for success. Those who dissemble and vacillate can harm and alienate their constituencies” (p. 42). Implicit in the foregoing is that,

in essence, it is the leaders' attitude, actions, and style – what organisational leaders do, and how they do it – that shape how organisations emerge from crises. For example, Eugene-Oguzie (2019) maintained that effective leadership not only creates viable strategies and conducive cultures, but also reinforces and consolidates these, while ensuring focus, coherence, and the maximisation of other available resources, even when organisational structures are stressed, their systems stretched, and their resources strained. Leadership is thus the differentiator, and an important factor for success or failure in any organisation (Paraschiv, 2013). Accordingly, Marzano, Waters and McNulty (2005) opined that “leadership is critical to the success of any institution or endeavour” (p. 4), because leadership is the central tool that holds all other organisational resources and practices together (Coulter, 2010).

The study focused on critical organisational leadership practices, attributes, processes, roles, tasks, responsibilities, insights, and challenges of the owner-manager-researcher of a small firm – AMYQ Ventures Limited – located in the commercial city of Lagos Nigeria, as the business faced series of crises and uncertainties in its short history. Using data from the firm, and supported by extant reports from the literature, I researched and critically analysed the challenges the company faced. This was to identify the sources and causes of these problems, understand their nature, and proffer adequate and sustainable solutions. In doing so, the study considered, among other key factors, the role played by my leadership practices as the owner-manager-researcher, and how these practices might have partly or wholly contributed to the crises the company faced. For example, could the my own leadership practices have been the cause of these challenges encountered by the firm? Could the company have plunged into financial and operational crises because I lacked the requisite training and knowledge suitable for the type of in which business the organisation engaged? Equally, could these problems have arisen because in transiting from being an employee in a commercial bank in Nigeria to an owner-manager of a small firm, I had transposed practices peculiar and suited to big corporate organisational set-ups with huge human, material, financial and intellectual resources, such as my former employers, that were incongruent with small organisations with limited resources like AMYQ Ventures?

The foregoing underlines the essence of this study as action learning research; being an inquiry into my own practices, it aimed to learn by participating, reflecting, and understanding what has been done or practiced; knowledge gained therefrom is used towards improving group learning, organisational effectiveness, efficiency, resilience, and overall performance. The thesis thus detailed my career or professional journey, experiences and learnings as an employee and manager in a commercial bank, and my efforts to transfer these experiences and learnings towards owning and managing my own business and using the same managerial skills and competencies that I had learnt in the bank to run this small business entity. The thesis analysed events, situations, practices, and results and outcomes in the company that led me as the owner-manager to question whether I was leading the company satisfactorily. In addition, the study tried to identify how and at what point I recognised the need to change and improve my leadership practices, especially in business decision-making in the management of the company. To achieve this, using relevant fiscal, financial, and operational data from the company's day to day log-book or activity-record manual, the study articulated a timeline of events and decisions in the company's history as it emerged, transacted businesses, and began to struggle.

1.5 Major Indices of Crises and Uncertainty in Small Businesses: The AMYQ Experience

Several reasons might cause crises and uncertainties in both big and small businesses and organisations alike. While some reasons might be exogenous, others might be endogenous. Edmondson (2011) believes that there are diverse reasons for the failure of small businesses. Failure of these firms can be broadly categorised into three areas, thus: preventable, complexity-related, and intelligent (Edmondson, 2011). In more general terms, the growth and survivability of new and upcoming small and medium scale enterprises (SMEs) like AMYQ Ventures Limited are known to be more likely to be affected adversely by any or all of these three broad categories. Factors like deviance, inattention, lack of ability, process inadequacy, and task challenge, among others listed by Edmondson (2011), were arguably present in the operational dynamics of AMYQ Ventures Ltd., thus leading to crises and uncertainty in the company. This goes further to affirm that the presence and impact of these elements that are often associated with precipitating organisational failure could well have created critical circumstances within AMYQ Ventures, which led to crises and uncertainty in the fledgling small firm. Expectedly, faced with considerable challenges to the

sustainability of its operations, the company struggled, and consequently sought a way to keep afloat by changing its business focus from logistics to agro-allied services.

1.6 External Factors as Context for Crises and Uncertainty in Small Firms

Indicative of the impact of the struggles faced by small business firms like AMYQ Ventures is the assertion from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 1997, p. 3) that “less than one-half of start-ups survive for more than five years and only a fraction develop into the high-growth firms which make important contributions to job creation.” One major reason that may account for this is the non-conduciveness of the business environment on one side, and the interaction of the business with its outside world. Tehseen and Ramayah (2015) have thus argued that as valuable and intangible as leadership and entrepreneurial competencies might be as resources to small businesses, achieving business success for SMEs requires much more than these, because the influence of entrepreneurial and leadership competencies on an SME’s success is often significantly subject to the moderating influence of external integration or other contingencies – specifically, how a given business leadership relates to and manages these external factors.

Manolova et al. (2020) have similarly averred that for businesses to survive and be successful, they must pay attention to the economic and social structure within which they operate. Implicit in their argument is that businesses may potentially be prone to different forms of crises and uncertainties that may arise because of events in their internal as well as external environments. They did, however, proffer that what distinguishes successful businesses from unsuccessful businesses is the former’s ability first, to strategically pivot in response to shocks; and second, to minimise risks and seize opportunities (Manolova et al., 2020). Of further relevance to this pivot process is that in highly uncertain, complex, and fast-moving environments, businesses should develop the capacity to transit from conventional assumptions and routine strategic planning towards a discovery-driven approach anchored on frequent evolutionary learning and a robust repetition of expeditious experimentation (McGrath, 2010).

1.7 Contextualising Organisational Leadership of a Small Firm During Crises and Uncertainty

Several authors have identified effective leadership in organisations as an important factor for success, not only in times of organisational stability and boom, but more importantly, as a critical tool for arresting crises and managing organisations through uncertainties. Though leadership, as a concept, varies in models, types, approaches, processes, and application, and may be subject to the nuanced interpretative orientation of different individuals and disciplines, when it is effective and strategic, it drives change and reforms, contains crises, and provides direction and inspiration under uncertainties (Eugene-Oguzie, 2019; Finn, Mysore and Usher, 2020; Nichols et al., 2020).

According to Riggio (cited in Abrams, 2020, p. 42), “What leaders have to realize is that when a crisis hits, you can’t just rest on your laurels and think that everything will move along normally.” Instead, organisational leaders need to devise “new operating models to respond quickly to the rapidly shifting environment and sustain their organisations through the trials ahead” (Finn et al., 2020, p. 1). While the nature of the challenges faced by AMYQ Ventures Limited appeared to be full of ‘financial and commercial management problems’, it can be argued that many of the solutions lay in my ability to adapt boldly to new realities and challenges (Nichols et al., 2020), and to develop and provide new, quick, precise, effective, and strategic leadership models for the organisation. This would involve first, creating and sustaining a clearer vision for the organisation, and second, communicating this vision and organisational circumstances to employees clearly and distinctly (Abrams, 2020; Meraku, 2017; Thuku, 2016), effectively, and transparently (D’Auria and De Smet, 2020). This further affirms that although factors extraneous to small businesses might contribute to the rise of crises and uncertainties, the appropriate response can be provided internally through effective leadership strategies.

1.8 Leadership Response of AMYQ Ventures Limited During Crises and Uncertainty

In 2011, AMYQ Ventures undertook what amounted to a bold strategic pivot of its business focus by entering the agricultural supply and service chain industry as an agro-dealer. This was partly (1), in response to the double shock inflicted (Manolova et al., 2020) by a shallow capital base that rendered the firm unable to compete against major industry marketers, and

the mounting operational costs precipitated by poor infrastructure; and (2), to reduce risks and enhance growth potentials by seizing and maximising new business opportunities (McGrath and Macmillan, 2009) created in the agricultural sector by the federal government of Nigeria. The company's focus here was to capitalise and maximise new business growth opportunities emerging in the form of the government's renewed efforts for fresh agriculture-driven economic frontiers. This involved AMYQ Ventures Limited participating as partners with the government of Nigeria in its nationwide agricultural transformation agenda (ATA), through its technically known anchor – the Growth Enhancement Support Scheme (GESS). In essence, the company's partnership with the government was to ensure that it benefited from the ATA-GESS government initiative, which overall was intended to create an agro-sector system within the larger economic spectrum, where the indirect beneficiaries would include existing and potential small, medium, and large-scale entrepreneurs and business associations involved in providing critical but sustainable supply-chain services to rural households (ADB, 2013). AMYQ Ventures Limited fitted this profile of a small-scale firm.

The Nigerian government proffered in several study reports (African Development Bank Group [ADB], 2013; Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development [FMARD], 2011; Olomola, 2015) that there was a need to diversify from an economy that was dependent only on oil. Consequently, the government organised a countrywide enumeration of all farmers, and mandated its partners, including AMYQ Ventures Limited, to process, acquire, and deliver subsidised agro-inputs. The essence was “to contribute to the private sector-led agricultural growth for food security, creation of jobs and shared wealth” (ADB, 2013, p. 3). In the Nigerian government's programme propositions and recommendations, farmers were to receive subsidised agro-inputs (fertiliser, seeds, implements), thereby reducing the cost to farmers, reducing poverty, and encouraging food production and food security across the country (Ejiogu, 2017; FMARD, 2016; Uduji, Okolo-Obasi, and Asongu, 2019). AMYQ Ventures successfully applied, mobilised, and worked on behalf of the government for four years, from 2011 to 2014. The company's turnover over these four years grew by 100%, from NGN10m (ten million Naira) per-annum to about NGN20m (twenty million Naira). Similarly, the company's staff strength grew from three employees at its 2011 inception to 21 employees in 2013.

Table 1: AMYQ Ventures Limited 5-Year Revenue Records: 2010 - 2014

AMYQ Ventures Limited, Nigeria. MANAGEMENT ACCOUNT: PROFIT AND LOSS – Amounts in Naira '000

Revenue	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Fertiliser NPK 20:10:10	3,000	3,060	3,182	3,373	7,016
Fertiliser Urea	3,600	3,672	3,818	4,048	4,371
Fertiliser NPK 12:12:17	6,000	6,120	6,364	6,746	7,286
Fertiliser NPK 15:15:15	2,700	2,754	2,864	3,036	3,278
Total revenue	15,300	15,606	16,228	17,203	21,951
Cost of Sales					
Fertiliser NPK 20:10:10	900,000	918,000	954,720	1,012,003	1,092,963
Fertiliser Urea	900,000	918,000	954,720	1,012,003	1,092,963
Fertiliser NPK 12:12:17	1,500,000	1,530,000	1,591,200	1,686,672	1,821,606
Fertiliser NPK 15:15:15	810,000	826,200	859,248	910,802	983,667
Cost of goods sold	4,110,000	4,192,200	4,359,888	4,621,481	4,991,199
Gross Profit	11,190,000	11,413,800	11,870,352	12,582,573	16,962,522

Source: AMYQ Ventures Limited Internal Accounts and Records (2019)

Like the first three years of the programme (see Table 1), the 2014 GESS programme was completed, but was never paid for by the federal government of Nigeria. It is commonly assumed by GESS participants and partners across the country, including AMYQ Ventures Limited, although arguable, that the non-payment of this cost by government to its partners such as AMYQ by the then federal government administration was principally due to the distractions occasioned by the incumbent administration's focus on the imminent general elections, which were held across the country between the last quarter of 2014 and the first quarter of 2015. A subsequent change in the elected government at the federal level, and government inconsistency, led to the non-payment of GESS partners and participants. As a result of the foregoing, small businesses such as AMYQ Ventures Limited, which acquired funding facilities from financial institutions to execute their transactions and supply farmers with 'agricultural inputs', were unable to meet their repayment obligations to their lenders. In like manner, and in addition, AMYQ Ventures Limited were unable to pay their other bills in 2015 and the following years. This included remunerating their employees as and

when due. It can be argued that the foregoing scenario underscores how the political climate of a society with its exigencies could cause crises and uncertainties in the activities and operations of a small business venture, with AMYQ Ventures Limited being a clear example.

This was a major problem, as the company became indebted to its bankers and lenders, suppliers, other service providers, and employees to a combined tune of more than NGN 100m. Further evidence of the negative impact of this emergent situation of crises and uncertainty for the company was attrition. Thirteen of the company's employees resigned their employment with the firm between 2014 and 2017, primarily due to non-payment of salaries and other reasons they would not disclose. Seven more employees were hired between 2015 and 2017 to bring the current total number of the company's employees to 15, including myself as the owner-manager. The yearly turnover between 2013 and 2018 similarly decreased to less than NGN 5m per-annum. Due to its huge debt profile when compared to its size, the company has also been making sustained losses, and employees have become noticeably unsupportive, with rising absenteeism. It was at this point that, as the owner-manager of the company, I recognised that the firm was facing a new and ongoing crisis that projected an uncertain future. Consequently, these financial problems and my commercial management shortfalls needs to be studied and improvements made for the company to survive. I began to analyse and seek ways of understanding how, as the company's leader, I could manage the crises more effectively and sustain its operations.

These analyses resulted, among others, in my critically questioning my organisational leadership aptitudes, skill-set, and managerial competencies; and whether these were sufficiently suited for managing a small firm as an entrepreneur. Also, given my managerial background as a bank employee, my analyses further raised questions about my leadership style, which leaned significantly on my experiences and learnings from the banking sector. As described earlier, this was more autocratic than it was democratic, because as managers, we were taught to be 'hard', decisive, but fair when taking decisions, especially when dealing with subordinates and making other decisions. With this managerial and leadership influence from my previous employment, it appeared that carrying my employees along by seeking their opinions in critical decision-making situations was an area of challenge that required improvement. Thus, my transition from being a manager in the banking sector to

an owner-manager of a small firm with limited resources to absorb shocks, and with a weakly defined leadership, management, and operational structure, seemed to constitute a problem. Could carrying my employees along and involving them more in my decision-making dynamics, thus encouraging them to buy into the business vision, have helped to provide greater clarity and insight, and kept them better motivated notwithstanding the challenges the company faced? Furthermore, with rising self-doubts over my leadership of my small firm, I also questioned whether I had made a good and correct decision to leave the banking industry as an employee to start and run my own business. In addition, I began to wonder whether my managerial skills (which had been hugely successful in the bank) would be adequate in the long-term to lead and galvanise the small firm out of these current problems. This action learning research partly came about as a means of systematically and scientifically investigating the problems to identify what roles, if any, my organisational leadership might have played in the company's ongoing crises.

1.9 Purpose of the Study

The study generally investigated the organisational leadership of a small firm in times of crises and uncertainty. Specifically, it looked at whether and how my leadership of the company had affected its operations and business viability and driven the current range of problems facing the firm. My leadership and managerial skills were akin to those I had learnt and applied as a bank employee. I dominated the meetings and issued orders to my employees. Yet, the continued problems of AMYQ Ventures, such as increased staff absenteeism, high turnover rates, and lack of profitability despite my managerial decisions, had become a concern to me since 2015. Although the company was still in business, the nature of the problems it was facing indicated that it was just a matter of time before it collapsed.

The main purpose of this study was to use the research to solve the firm's problems of poor liquidity, absenteeism, declining sales, declining profit, and employee apathy. The prevalent situation was a crisis. Although there is reasonable cause to suggest that the government's non-payment of our bills was a huge cause of the problem facing the organisation, it is plausible from extant research to establish that effective organisational leadership could prevent the organisation from completely collapsing and ceasing to exist,

given the rich vein of studies significantly correlating effective and strategic organisational leadership to effective management of crises in organisations, whether the crises are internally or externally driven (Abrams, 2020; Eugene-Oguzie, 2019; McNulty and Marcus, 2020; Nichols et al., 2020).

This study, therefore, is primarily an attempt to undertake AL research as part of my DBA program to understand the true nature of these problems, and to proffer solutions that are suitable to the company's specific circumstances. Moreover, the study seeks to contribute to the knowledge economy on how researchers can use action learning to resolve problems of which they are part by scientifically and systematically establishing the evidence for the real problems being addressed by the research, showing evidence of action being taken on these problems, and importantly, confirming that the changes and learning have taken place successfully (Coughlan and Coughlan, 2008).

1.10 Scholar-Practitioner's Context and Role

I am the researcher and I am also a member of the firm AMYQ Ventures Limited, as the owner-manager, involved in the day-to-day management of the business. I am also a Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) student at the University of Liverpool. There is thus a role duality in this study. My first role as an insider was to understand and bridge the gap between the practical challenges facing AMYQ Ventures and the academic principles of leadership in times of crises and uncertainty. Also, I used the benefit of being a company insider and an employee to bring the research to a conclusion. The completed DBA modules served as useful guides during the research.

I also played the role of a facilitator/consultant for the purpose of this research. While promoting and guiding the set (a group of employees) in the action learning process, I was mindful of my position and previous orientation as the sole decision-maker in the firm. This research provided me with the opportunity to give employees a chance to make constructive contributions and suggestions that could assist in solving the myriad of challenges the organisation faced. The employees were encouraged and assured that they were a key part of the organisation and would learn while solving the organisation's problems. I avoided ethical shortcomings by consciously mitigating biases, prejudices, assumptions, and a mind-

set that could undermine the findings of the study, while accommodating the perspectives of participating employees who worked in the learning sets.

1.11 Significance of the Study

The study is significant for several reasons and would benefit various stakeholders. In line with Coughlan and Peddler (2007), I as the owner-manager-researcher would benefit from this action learning research, as it will provide concrete three-way evidence of the real problems being encountered and addressed through the research, what actions are being taken to mitigate the problems, and that learnings from the study have taken place.

The study will benefit AMYQ Ventures limited because the actions taken and learnings that take place could ensure that the firm does not go into extinction. The study could help redirect the company's leadership and management focus, priorities, communication styles and strategies, and how employees are treated. Employees, for example, could begin to perceive their owner-manager and management in a different light and be more motivated to engage and commit to added efforts, notwithstanding the non-payment of their remunerations. This can happen if, through their involvement in the research, they begin to feel valued by me as the owner-manager and consequently buy into my vision. These employees could play a huge role in repositioning our company out of the crises, and are therefore essential to the study (Wheeler, Colbert, and Freeman, 2003).

The SME business community would also benefit from the research. Although the primary essence of the study is specific to solving the problems faced by AMYQ Ventures, and "not to seek to create universal knowledge for application in a generalised context" (Thuku, 2016, p. 5), operators of other SMEs who might be facing similar challenges currently or in the future could draw useful lessons and parallels from how AMYQ Ventures coped during crises and uncertainty.

Similarly, the business owners would benefit from the research because every study has huge potential to contribute to and enhance the knowledge economy of its field. The study will further contribute significantly towards understanding the use of action learning in solving small business financial and commercial management problems in Nigeria.

Other potential beneficiaries include the government and its ministries (of agriculture, finance, commerce and industry, labour and productivity, and youth and sports), regulatory bodies and agencies, bankers and financial institutions, supply-chain service providers, and AMYQ Ventures Limited's customers, among others.

1.12 The use of Action Learning Research Methodology

This section describes the research methodology that was employed in the research. According to Pedler (2008), action learning is a real-time organisation inquiry aimed at solving one or more crucial issues of the organisation. It involves the use of small groups within the organisation, called sets, to constructively analyse the company's problems and develop actionable solutions. Action learning is a means of study that challenged my initial perception of management. Though I have held firm to my one-man management and leadership philosophy over the years, the crisis within the firm called for an appropriate research methodology that will improve learning for me, my employees, and the organisation. Action learning methodology provided this, as it is effective in managing risks and uncertainties while also learning from the outcomes for the interest of the firm (Pedler, 2008). It has also been found to be effective in building and improving the leadership skill-sets and behaviour (Leonard and Lang, 2010) of managers and business owners.

McLaughlin and Thorpe (1993) posited that action learning supports learning through action and acting from learning, since these will be of the firm's interest. My main interest in action learning is its use of insightful questioning which leads to reflection and understanding so that actions taken thereafter are justified. As Cowan (2012) noted, the action learning set is crucial for the success of the methodology. According to Cowan (2012), the $L=P+Q$ model leads to learning. The Learning (L) within the firms is equal to the sum of programmed knowledge (P) and insightful questioning (Q). Most challenging problems have indeterminacy as a main feature (Conklin, 2006). AMYQ Ventures' problems of demotivated workforce, poor cashflow, declining revenue, non-payment of invoices by government, and poor management have been difficult to cope with. To understand these problems, action learning was necessary.

Further, as a research design or methodology, action learning is useful in supporting employee learning, leadership, and team development in firms (Dilworth and Wills, 2003; Marquardt et al., 2009; Park et al., 2013; Reynolds and Vince, 2004). Action learning has proved to be an effective learning program for entrepreneurs (Clarke et al., 2006; Kinsey, 2011) and can provide business support or management development for small firms (Boak et al., 2020). Therefore, the use of action learning inquiry will be useful for AMYQ Ventures Limited.

1.13 Research Aim and Objectives

This study set out to identify how the organisational leadership competencies of an owner-manager of a small business firm - AMYQ Ventures Limited - could help solve the company's multiple problems as the firm underwent crises and uncertainty. Specifically, the study was designed to achieve the following objectives:

Personal:

1. To learn and develop as an action learner.
2. To work in an action learning set.
3. To learn how to manage employees and financial difficulties.

Practice:

1. To act and create a motivated workforce.
2. To act and reduce absenteeism.
3. To act and improve liquidity, cash flow, and profit.

1.14 Research Questions

The following questions guided the study:

1. What actions are necessary to manage the employees for better motivation?
2. What actions should be taken to reduce employee absenteeism?
3. What actions are needed to increase the revenue and profitability of the business?

1.15 Structure of the Thesis

The thesis was structured into seven chapters.

Chapter One provided the background and context of the research. It also presented the purpose and significance of the research and the research questions that guided the study. In addition, the chapter highlighted the varying contexts within which I as owner-manager, and the company being studied, have been presented. This was to ensure a better understanding of the research aims and objectives.

Chapter Two is a review of extant literature relevant to the themes and theories requisite to the study. Here, major themes, concepts, terms, and theories underpinning the research are critically considered. These include the transition from employee to employer, managerial guilt, understanding crises and uncertainty, relevant organisational leadership theories, owner-manager risk, and crisis management.

Chapter Three sets out the methodology and design of the research adopted. It presents the justification for the interpretive research paradigm and the use of AL methodology.

In Chapter Four, data are presented and analysed. This covers the data from the action learning sets, 360-degree evaluation of AMYQ leadership, and interviews with employees of the company.

Chapter Five is a discussion of the main findings of the research.

Chapter Six presents research reflections and comparison of research outcomes with existing literature.

In Chapter Seven, the summary and conclusion of the research are presented, along with management and leadership implications from the research findings. Contributions to theory, practice, and methodology are also presented here. Limitations of the research and recommendations are also presented in this chapter.

1.16 Chapter Summary

This chapter outlined the organisational circumstances, contexts, motivation, and rationale for the research. It also presented my story and experience, which supported my resolve to conduct the research. The company's major problems were also introduced in this chapter. I tried to establish why these problems had arisen: although they were of a seemingly financial and commercial nature, I also focused on my organisational leadership of the company as a key concern deserving of greater research attention. Further justification of the action learning process was also introduced, together with the research aims and objectives, and its overall significance to the organisation and beyond.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2. Introduction

This chapter provides a review of the literature on relevant concepts and ideas that influenced my thinking about the journey from employee to business owner/employer. It covers areas such as the transition from employee to employer, the managerial and leadership guilt faced while running the business, small business leadership, and crisis management. It also presents arguments that influenced me and the questions they posed to me personally and to my organisation.

2.1 Transition of Employment: Employee to Employer/Business owner

Several studies opine that the main factor that motivates business start-ups and transition of employment from employee to business owner is job autonomy (Carter et al., 2003; Feldman and Bolino, 2000; Van Gelderen and Jansen, 2006). The probability of being a business owner or a small business starter is heavily influenced by job autonomy, despite the increased workload and the longer hours to be worked (Binder and Coad, 2013; Lange, 2012). Despite earning less and working longer hours, business owners make the transition from employment to self-employment due to job satisfaction (Hundley, 2001), and the opportunity to be free and independent when making key decisions and having discretionary work scheduling and work methods (Morgeson and Humphrey, 2006).

In addition, Simoes et al. (2016) argued that other reasons may be that such transitions are made to enable the concerned person to enter a new career path and to have more access to financial resources. However, Tran et al. (2021) argued that those who move towards self-employment do so due to both push and pull factors. The decision to change one's status from employee to employer could be based on the attractiveness of the home and host organisations, which contrive to pull individuals to new start-ups or business ownership, while the push factors such as harsh organisational climate, poor job satisfaction, lack of promotion and poor salary push them away from employment and contribute to their mobility (Tran et al., 2021). Flexibility, autonomy, financial reward, and creating social

wealth are some of the reasons that drive the transition from paid employment to self-employment.

2.2 Managerial and Leadership Guilt

Different individuals have diverse experiences in organisational leadership and are prone to experience different levels of guilt while leading their teams (Tangney and Dearing, 2002). The business owner is expected to shoulder the gains and losses of the business and communicate them to the employees (Hearit, 2006; Lee et al., 2004). In times of crisis, uncertainty and employee apathy, self-examination by the business owner is required to first understand the issues at hand and to use the learning to move the organisation forward (Amodio et al., 2007).

The business owner's tendency to feel guilt when the business hits troubled waters is considered a moral emotion that could shape organisational communication within the business (Salvador et al., 2012a). Although Coombs (1998) and Marcus and Goodman (1991) opined that guilt leads to defensive approaches to management, Amodio et al. (2007) saw it as a positive driver of effective leadership behaviour. It encourages more vigilance and moderation in decision-making and better leadership acts. Salvador et al. (2012a, 2012b) posited that guilt can enrich and enhance the business owner's decision-making process, as it leads managers to apologise for organisational failures and take corrective action. Leaders who are prone to feelings of guilt tend to be better at correcting their mistakes, showing more empathy while effectively resolving conflicts and crisis (Cohen et al., 2011; Coombs, 2004; Tangney and Dearing, 2002). Schaumberg and Flynn (2012) believed that guilt-proneness in dictatorial leaders makes them highly effective in leadership. There is therefore a need to consider what leadership type and skills one would need in order to have a positive impact on the small business problems being faced by AMYQ Ventures Limited. At times, I felt as though I was the problem, or at least part of the problem.

2.3 Organisational Leadership

A business leader bears the responsibility of planning, organising, and leading a team or group within an organisation. The process through which a business leader undertakes his/her role is termed leadership (Czinkota et al., 2011; Jones and George, 2013; Robbins

and Coutler, 2015). Leadership is a dynamic process because leaders assume diverse roles and exhibit different characteristics. The role of a business leader can impact the company beyond the organisational boundaries (Wooten and James, 2008). Organisational leadership plays essential roles in the reduction of business failure and improvement of organisational performance.

An organisational leader should possess the necessary managerial skills, and should also encourage the team members to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills to improve their efficiency and the company's performance. Appropriate managerial decision-making skills and leadership attributes can foster and reinforce employees' performance, behaviour, and creativity (Armstrong, 2012; Baran and Adelman, 2010; CIPD, 2011; Hale, 2013). A leader who is responsive to the needs of his/her followers can motivate employees to pursue organisational goals and objectives (Ashkanasy and Tse, 2000).

Acquisition of the requisite skills and education can improve the performance and survivability of small businesses. However, recent studies have shown that leaders of many small businesses pay insufficient attention to research and training (Atamian and VanZante, 2010; Datar, Garvin, and Cullen, 2011; Frese et al., 2016; Isomura, 2010; Johnson and Gugerty, 2017; Panagiotakopoulos, 2020). It is important to remember that most small businesses are managed by their owners (owner-managers). These owner-managers are involved in the day-to-day operations of the business, and make most of the decisions within such firms.

2.4 Organisational Crises and Uncertainty

Uncertainty is associated with a crisis because a poorly managed crisis may have severe consequences for a firm (Barton, 2007; Boin et al., 2007; James and Lynn, 2010). Generally, organisational crisis may be classified into three categories – (a) accidents, (b) scandals, and (c) product safety and health incidents – which can lead to organisational reputation or brand damage (Baran and Adelman, 2010; Beaubien, 2016; Bundy et al., 2017; Trainor and Velotti, 2013). Coombs (1999) noted that crises could be clustered, while Lerbinger (1997) highlighted eight categories or types of crises, which are: (1) natural disasters, (2) technological crises, (3) confrontation, (4) malevolence, (5) organisational misdeeds, (6)

workplace violence, (7) rumours, and (8) terrorist attacks/man-made disasters. Organisational crises and uncertainty are discussed in this section: the first part focuses on organisational crises, and the second part focuses on uncertainty.

2.4.1 Organisational Crises

Organisational crises refer to events which threaten the viability and competitiveness of an organisation. McConnell and Drennan (2006) stated that crises might be viewed from positivist (with sets of criteria) and interpretive (depending on individual perception) perspectives. A crisis can impact negatively on an organisation's activity; hence, it is necessary for organisational leadership to act appropriately in managing organisational crises promptly (Herbane, 2010; Rosenthal et al. 2001). Boin (2006) argued that disaster is an outcome of a crisis, while a crisis is a threat or destabilizing situation. Disasters may occur due to poor management of crises (Bundy et al., 2017; Carmeli and Schaubroeck, 2008;).

Although crises may cause injury or loss to a firm (Appelbaum et al., 2012; Groh, 2014), crises may also be beneficial to an organisation if adequately managed (Bundy et al., 2017; Coombs, 2007). This implies that crises may be beneficial or detrimental to an organisation. Hence, it is reasonable to describe crises as situations which are either harmful to organisations or provide opportunities and positive gains. This means that crises may be beneficial to a firm if the organisation's leadership is able to maximise the positive gains or opportunities presented by the situation(s). It is, however, necessary for the organisation's leadership to engage an appropriate crisis management strategy to maximise opportunities entrenched in the crisis (Ulmer, Sellnow, and Seeger, 2006; Vaartjes, 2010; Vardarlier, 2016). It is also essential that managers and leaders of small firms enhance their crisis management capabilities in order to proactively resolve crises and maximise opportunities therefrom (Haddon, Loughlin, and McNally, 2015; Hale, 2013; Lowman, 2001; Wooten and James, 2008).

An unpleasant event or situation may not result in crisis if properly and proactively managed. This means that crises may occur if a firm's leadership or top management fail to formulate and implement a good crisis response strategy. Carmeli and Schaubroeck (2008) argued that crises might expose the ineffectiveness of an organisation's crisis response

strategy. There are several symptoms of organisational crises, which include low earnings, reduced market presence and market share, reduced customer satisfaction, dissatisfied employees, and high staff turnover.

2.4.2 Uncertainty

Uncertainty is a phenomenon that can limit an individual's or organisation's knowledge about the outcome of an event. Uncertainty constitutes an event with an unpredictable extent and consequences. Hence, uncertainty is associated with crises because it makes it challenging to assign credible probabilities and exact consequences (Lalonde, 2011; Oprea, Sarpe and Dumitru, 2011). Uncertainty may impact the growth and survival of small firms (including AMYQ Ventures Limited) operating in a business environment (Baker and Bloom, 2013; Bloom, 2009). The global business environment is dynamic. Likewise, the business environment in Nigeria is volatile and uncertain for commercial purposes. Uncertain situations faced by businesses (including AMYQ Ventures Limited) in Nigeria include changes in government regulations and policies, increased competition, erratic power supply, changes in consumer behaviour, and inadequate infrastructural facilities.

An organisation's environment, both internal and external, plays a crucial role in determining its structure, operations, and performance (Jones and George, 2013; Robbins and Coutler, 2015). Most internal factors are within the organisation's control, but external factors are not. External factors which are beyond the control of an organisation include economic, political, regulatory, technological, and social changes or factors. More importantly, these factors impact significantly on the formation, operations, and growth of small firms. For instance, the operations of AMYQ Ventures Limited have been affected negatively by political, regulatory, and economic uncertainties in Nigeria.

Political uncertainty is associated with unstable governance and changes in government policies (Masayuki, 2016; Pastor and Veronesi, 2013). Unstable governance and frequent changes in government policies may increase the level of political uncertainty within a country's business environment (Bryan, Pastor, and Pietro, 2016; Candace, 2017; Tan and Chintakananda, 2016). Increased regulation and uncertainty of regulations can reduce business investments (Bittlingmayer, 2001; Brandon and Yook, 2012; Candace, 2017). The

change in the Nigerian government in 2015 affected the agricultural sector significantly. The political uncertainty associated with this change impacted negatively on AMYQ Ventures Limited, which is involved in the marketing of agro-related products in Nigeria. The government did not make the payments due to contractors in the agricultural sector. Likewise, it failed to release subsidies due to participating firms (including AMYQ Ventures Limited). Hence, AMYQ Ventures Limited, which is an agro-dealer, found it difficult to pay its suppliers, contractors, banks, and employees' salaries. This shows that political uncertainty has impacted negatively on AMYQ Ventures Limited, thereby causing acute liquidity problems and inability to achieve its corporate objectives.

Economic uncertainty is associated with consumers' confidence to invest, economic growth, financial market activities, inflation, and prevailing exchange rate in a country (Brandon and Yook, 2012; Caldara et al., 2016; Haroon and Konstantinos, 2017; Stein and Wang, 2017;. Krol (2017) argued that economic policy uncertainty has a considerable impact on small firms. Precisely, the recession in Nigeria constituted an economic uncertainty that led to the devaluation of the Naira - the Nigerian currency. The cost of procurement of fertiliser became too high for AMYQ Ventures Limited due to the high exchange rates that suppliers incurred in importing the products. The price of fertiliser more than doubled, from USD23/50kg bag to USD50/50kg bag, making it difficult for the company to purchase the fertiliser.

As mentioned earlier, the external environment is beyond the control of an organisation. However, an organisation can align with and minimise the impact of the external environment through co-creation (Agarwal and Helfat, 2009). Co-creation enables a firm to engage a continual incremental strategy to cope with and adapt to changes in its environment (Agarwal and Helfat 2009; Volberda and Lewin, 2003). The co-creation approach can enhance the management of crises and uncertainty within a small firm. The management of crises and uncertainty within a small firm can also be improved by aligning the rate of change of internal environment with the external environment (Ben-Menahem et al., 2013). The implication is that the inability of the leadership or management of a small firm to be proactive in managing internal and external environments/factors (including political, regulatory, and economic uncertainty) may lead to crises. Adoption of a suitable

and proper crisis management framework is essential in managing crises and uncertainty in a small firm. A useful crisis management framework would provide an excellent platform for managing crises and uncertainty within an organisation.

2.5 Concept of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs): Roles and Definitions

Small firms play essential roles in the growth of developed and developing economies such as Nigeria (Ayozie, 2011; Ihua, 2009; Ogechukwu, 2011; Okpara, 2011). Munro (2013) asserted that about 63% of the workforce and 90% of firms in the world are related to small and medium enterprises (SMEs). Similarly, according to Jamali, Zanhour, and Kehishian (2009), 65% of employment worldwide is generated by SMEs; and about 90% of companies across the globe are SMEs (Kongolo, 2010). In developing countries (including Nigeria), small firms stimulate local entrepreneurship and employment, increase domestic savings, and boost large-scale production (Ayozie, 2011; Ihua, 2009; Ogechukwu, 2011). Berisha and Shikora (2015) argued that a business must meet the quantitative criteria of the number of employees and at least one financial criterion to be categorised as a micro, small or medium business.

There is no universally acceptable definition of small firms in the literature (Curran and Blackburn, 2001; Josefy et al., 2015). The definition of small businesses may vary from country to country, and from industry to industry. For instance, the Small Business Administration (SBA, 2003) of the United States of America (USA) posited that there are various definitions for small businesses depending on the type of industry. In the USA, small businesses in the Manufacturing and Mining industries are described as businesses which have fewer than 500 employees ; but businesses in wholesale trade must have fewer than 100 employees to be classified as small businesses (SBA, 2003). The European Commission (EC) definition of businesses is based on the number of employees, annual turnover, and annual balance sheet total, as shown in Table 1 (EC, 2018). Specifically, the EC (2018) defined a small business as a business that has fewer than 50 employees with a minimum of €10 million annual turnover or annual balance sheet total (Table 2).

Table 2: Definition of Small and Medium Enterprises with European Union standards

Enterprise category	Headcount: Annual Work Unit (AWU)	Annual turnover	or	Annual balance sheet total
Medium-sized	< 250	≤ €50 million	or	≤ €50 million
Small	< 50	≤ €10 million	or	≤ €10 million
Micro	< 10	≤ €2 million	or	≤ €2 million

Source: European Commission (2018)

The World Bank (2008) defined SMEs using three quantitative criteria - number of employees, total assets in U.S. dollars, and annual sales in U.S. dollars - as shown in Table 3. By the World Bank (2008) definition, small businesses consist of firms which have between 10 and 50 employees, and with total assets or total annual sales of between \$100,000 and \$3,000,000 (Table 3).

Table 3: Definition of Small and Medium Enterprises by World Bank standards

Enterprise indicators (2/3)	Number of employees	Total assets	or	Total annual sales
Medium	> 50; ≤ 300	>\$3,000,000; ≤\$15,000,000	or	>\$3,000,000; ≤ \$15,000,000
Small	> 10; ≤ 50	>\$100,000; ≤ \$3,000,000	or	>\$100,000; ≤ \$3,000,000
Micro	< 10	≤ \$100,000	or	≤ \$100,000

Source: World Bank (2008)

There is also no clear-cut definition of small businesses in Nigeria. The Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) described small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) as companies having between 11 to 300 employees and with an annual debt turnover of between N5 million and N500 million (CBN, 2017). Nigeria’s National Council of Industries (NCI) defined SMEs as business enterprises whose total costs, excluding land, is not more than two hundred million Naira (N200,000,000.00) (NCI, 2012). Also, the Nigeria Bank of Industry (2017) defined a small enterprise as a firm that has between 11 and 50 employees, with total assets

of between N5 million and N10 million and a minimum annual turnover of N100 million (Table 4).

Table 4: Definition of Small and Medium Enterprises by Bank of Industry

Enterprise Category	Number of Employees	Total Assets (N'Million)	Annual Turnover (N'Million)
Micro	≤ 10	≤ 5	≤ 20
Small	> 11 ≤ 50	> 5 ≤ 100	≤ 100
Medium	> 51 ≤ 200	> 100 ≤ 500	≤ 500

Source: Nigeria Bank of Industry (2017)

The preceding discussions suggested that small businesses are enterprises which have between 11 and 50 employees (European Commission, 2018; Nigeria Bank of Industry, 2017; World Bank, 2008). This is consistent with the definition of small businesses by previous studies which indicated that small companies have fewer than 100 employees (Adisa, Abdulraheem, and Mordi, 2014; Alaye-Ogan, 2012). However, some scholars have argued that small firms include businesses with fewer than nine employees (Barkhatov, Pletnev, and Campa, 2016; Hatten, 2012).

It is also possible to identify small businesses based on their operations and management. Loecher (2000) noted that some qualitative criteria might be relevant in identifying small businesses, arguing that small business owners often assume the roles of leadership and decision-making, and bear the liability risk. Yon and Evans (2011) identified eight categories of qualitative indicators of SMEs, which included: management, personnel, organisation, sales, buyer’s relationship, production, research and development, and finance (Table 5).

Table 5: Qualitative indicators in discerning SMEs from large companies

Category	SMEs	Large Companies
Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proprietor-Entrepreneurship • Functions linked to personalities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Manager-entrepreneurship • Division of labor by subject matters
Personnel	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of university graduates • All-round Knowledge 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dominance of university graduates • Specialization
Organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highly personalized contacts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highly formalized communication
Sales	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comparative position not defined and uncertain 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong competitive position
Buyer’s Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unstable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Based on long-term contracts
Production	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Labor intensive 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Capital intensive, economies of scale
Research Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Following the market, intuitive approach 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Institutionalized
Finance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Role of family funds, self financing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diversified ownership structure, access to anonymous capital market

Source: Yon and Evans (2011)

It is therefore reasonable to state that the company used for the present study, namely AMYQ Ventures Limited, is a small company because it has 15 employees, with an annual turnover of less than N100 million. Moreover, it falls into the small business category based on the Nigeria Bank of Industry (2017) definition of a small enterprise (Table 4). This is the basis for identifying AMYQ as a small business.

2.6 Small Business Problems

Small firms are susceptible to various macro-environmental variables, such as weak internal controls, poor management, weak organisational structures, increased competition, and inexperienced leadership (Kautsar et al., 2019; Okpara, 2011; Suh, 2010). Challenges faced by small businesses, especially in Nigeria, include corruption, insecurity, weak management structure, limited capital, and poor infrastructure (Kauffmann, 2005; Okpara, 2011). In addition, such businesses also have funding constraints, which make it harder to achieve financial flexibility during hard times (Okpara, 2011). These variables include the marketing, leadership, social, political, human resources, and related financial problems being faced by AMYQ Ventures Limited. Small businesses face enormous challenges, which may limit their growth and survival (Okpara, 2011). These challenges constitute risks and uncertainties, which may impact negatively on their survival and profitability.

The rate of failure of small businesses in developing countries (including Nigeria) is higher compared to developed countries (Arinaitwe, 2006). A significant number of small businesses in Nigeria die within a few years of formation (Fadun, 2016; Obi, 2013). Factors responsible for the high rate of small business failure in Africa (including Nigeria) include adoption of inappropriate strategies; exogenous problems; management issues; infrastructure issues; corruption; technology issues; financing issues; failure to conduct thorough primary market research; and adverse economic effects on small businesses (Harris and Gibson, 2006; Ishak, Omar, and Ahmad, 2012; Mambula, 2002; Moses and Adebisi, 2013; Okafor, 2011; Smit and Watkins, 2012; Tushabomwe-Kazooba, 2006). Since AMYQ Ventures Limited operates in Nigeria, the company is susceptible to such challenges.

Despite these problems, however, small businesses have been known to withstand shocks and diverse problems, since they are likely to have more flexible and adaptive ways to respond (Purwati et al., 2020), and have become very resilient over time when compared to large-scale organisations (Husti and Mahyarni, 2019).

2.7 Small Business Resilience

According to Lengnick-Hall et al. (2011), resilience is the ability of a firm to withstand adverse business events, which could be external and/or internal, especially those that threaten the survival of the organisation. When small businesses face challenges, it is their resilience that enables them to face uncertainty and crises (Lee et al., 2013; Luther et al., 2000; Sutcliffe and Vogus, 2003). Liu et al. (2019) and Kossek and Perrigina (2016) suggested that resilience should be seen using two lenses. The first lens looks at resilience in terms of personal characteristics, especially of the leader, while the second lens views resilience in terms of reviewing a process for incremental improvements, especially of an organisation. According to Berman (2009), small business resilience could be achieved through effective leadership, sound judgement, and flexibility. Individual traits of the business owner and the organisation's ability to continuously anticipate changes in the business environment would improve survivability, resilience, and growth (Cooper et al., 2013; Dutton, 2003; Wong et al., 2021).

Owners of small businesses can improve their resilience through their perception of formal crisis management planning (Herbane, 2013), and through their flexibility, patience, and constant rethinking of the business environment (Berman, 2009). Bullough and Renko (2013) were of the opinion that the self-efficacy of the leader and resilience play a key role in the small business that is facing challenging times.

In addition, Allas et al. (2021) argued and posited that small and medium-scale businesses have their leaders very close to the frontline workers. These small businesses have fewer corporate policies than big firms, and this allows the managers and owners to make decisions more quickly and communicate effectively to employees. The fewer layers between business owners and workers lead to better decision-making and resilience (Allas et al., 2021), although Baxter (2021) suggested that lack of adequate personnel may pose a

problem for small businesses and may hamper business continuity and resilience. However, owner-managers can easily fill resource gaps that may be present in their businesses and quickly make decisions to keep the business viable or thriving in the face of crisis (Kevill et al., 2017; Werner et al., 2018). Herbane (2019) agreed that the owner-manager's role is crucial, as they influence the resilience of the business through their planning, learning, networks, and the location decisions they make.

Hence, the leadership of a small business needs to effectively manage crises and uncertainty, which may arise from challenges faced by the company (Howell, 2019). Organisational leadership is one of the determinants of SME performance (Abdu and Anggraini, 2021) and is considered in the next section.

2.8 Organisational Leadership in Small Firms

Dunne et al. (2016) argued that the leadership of small businesses is aimed at motivating subordinates to positively influence organisation's performance, innovative capabilities, and competitive strength. Small business managers who focus on day-to-day business activities, with less emphasis on training, may be less effective in their ability to strategise and prepare for the future. Failure to promote training and staff development may lead to corporate short-sightedness, which may impact on the firm's survival during crises and uncertainty. The short-sightedness of business owners or managers has led to liquidation or extinction of several small businesses after the death of their owners (Dunne et al., 2016; Esteve-Perez and Manez-Castillejo, 2008; Harris and Gibson, 2006; Hatten, 2012). Since the business is an entity distinct from its owners, it is beneficial for leaders and owners of small firms to focus on collaboration, mentoring and improvement of their team or staff to enhance the survival and continuity of their organisations. An organisational leader can foster effective mentoring through planning, training, information sharing, and networking (Price and McMullan, 2012).

The formulation of long-term strategies by small firms' managers or leaders can reduce the failure of small businesses, thereby enhancing their profitability and sustainability. Hence, small firms' leaders should reduce their focus on profit and develop long-term survival strategies (Goxe, 2010; Hamel, 2009; Holloway and Schaefer, 2014; Mazzarol, 2014). It is

beneficial for the leadership of a small business to adopt long-term strategies to enable the firm to be responsive to social imperatives, understand sustainable initiatives, meet customers' needs, develop strategic vision, and improve organisational resilience (Fadun, 2017; Herbane, 2010; Kotter, 2007).

It is essential for the leadership of small firms to acquire and develop necessary managerial skills, including conceptual, human, and technical skills (Jones and George, 2013). Acquisition of essential managerial skills by small businesses managers would promote efficient utilization of organisational resources. Small business managers and owners should also motivate their teams to foster cooperation and teamwork. Acquisition of intuitive skills by leaders of small firms is beneficial in motivating team members. This is because intuitive skills would enable the leadership of small businesses to understand, discern, and identify how and why people-to-people relationships work (Holloway and Schaefer, 2014). A motivational leadership role can also enhance employee innovation and business success (Ashkanasy and Tse, 2000; Mayfield and Mayfield, 2004;). Intuitive skills would also enable leaders of small firms to appreciate and value team members to ensure the attainment of organisational goals and objectives.

Appropriate managerial decision-making skills and leadership attributes can foster and reinforce employee performance, behaviour, and creativity (Armstrong, 2012; Baran and Adelman, 2010; CIPD, 2011; Hale, 2013;). A leader who is responsive to the needs of their followers can motivate employees to pursue organisational goals and objectives (Ashkanasy and Tse, 2000). In this regard, Dunne et al. (2016) argued that the leadership of small businesses could motivate their subordinates and influence their organisation's performance, innovative capabilities, and competitive strength.

Furthermore, leaders of small firms should promote innovation to ensure appropriate management of crises and uncertainty. The innovation initiatives of the leadership of a small firm can impact on the way crises and uncertainty are managed within the organisation. Leadership competencies are also crucial in managing crises and uncertainty (Holloway and Schaefer, 2014; Teng, Bhatia, and Anwar, 2011; Wooten and James, 2008). Hence, organisational leadership and leadership competencies can impact the management of

crises and uncertainty within a small firm. The term 'organisational leadership' in the context of this study is viewed as comprising business managers, leaders, and decision-makers. Having discussed organisational leadership in small firms, I will now proceed to explore relevant leadership styles in the next section.

2.9 Leadership Approaches and Management of Crises and Uncertainty in Small Firms

Leadership is a dynamic process whereby leaders play different roles and exhibit diverse behavioural characteristics within an organisation. Leadership competencies, behaviour, and styles are useful in the management of crises and uncertainty within an organisation (Baran and Adelman, 2010; Lalonde, 2011; Trainor and Velotti, 2011; Wooten and James 2008). There are several leadership styles, including authoritative/autocratic leadership (Hogg and Adelman, 2013), the ethical leadership and decision-making model (Sagas, Brian and Wigley, 2014; Trevino and Brown, 2004); the path-goal model of leadership (House, 1971; Evans, 1970); super-leadership models (Manz and Sims, 1990, 2001); the leadership continuum (Tannenbaum and Schmidt, 1973); situational leadership (Hersey, Blanchard and Johnson, 2008; Thompson and Vecchio, 2009); contingency leadership (Fiedler, 1967; Lutans, 2011; Morgan, 2007; Thompson, 1967); leaderful leadership theory (Raelin, 2003, 2011); and trait theory (Cattell, 1950; Evans and Allport, 2011; Eysenck, 1947; Matthews, Deary and Whiteman, 2003). For this study, five leadership styles/models are discussed in this section: autocratic leadership, trait theory; leaderful leadership theory; contingency leadership; and the path-goal model of leadership.

2.9.1 Autocratic Leadership

This leadership style, also known as authoritarian leadership, is one in which the leader is the sole decision-maker and has little or no input from employees or subordinates (Harms et al., 2018; Hogg and Adelman, 2013). Such leaders are not open to ideas from subordinates or followers and dominate proceedings, demanding absolute obedience in the process (Cheng et al., 2004). Due to the leader's controlling nature and attitude (showing no positive emotions and concern), Chen et al. (2014) believed that employees may see the leader as too domineering, and as such, they are unlikely to put in extra effort on the job, to the detriment of the organisation (Yoshikawa et al., 2019). This style of leadership may lead to rapid decision-making and supervisory effectiveness (Rosener, 2011), but these decisions may be

arbitrary and lead to less participation from followers and employees, especially during crisis management (Gorgulu, 2020). I practiced this style of leadership as the owner of AMYQ, and it represents the same style of leadership that I learnt during my banking career. It may be necessary to reconsider this approach in order to solve the organisational problems.

2.9.2 Trait Theory

The trait theory views leadership in terms of the traits, behavioural characteristics, and human personality of leaders. Traits can be described as characteristics which influence a person's response under any circumstances. Stodgill (1974) stated that leaders have certain inherent traits that enable them to lead. However, Levine (2008) emphasised that successful leadership cannot be attained mainly through a combination of traits. There have been several studies of personality traits. Cattell (1950) identified 400 traits, which he categorised into three levels: personal traits, cardinal traits, and central traits. Eysenck (1947) developed a model of three universal traits: introversion/extraversion, neuroticism/emotional stability, and psychoticism. Meanwhile, researchers in the literature have identified five core common human personality traits, namely extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness (Cattell, 1950; Evans and Allport, 2011; Eysenck, 1947; Matthews, Deary and Whiteman, 2003; McCrae and Costa, 1997; Stodgill, 1974). Although personality traits may be relevant during crisis and uncertainty in small businesses, it is believed that the trait theory of leadership is too general and inconsistent in understanding the leadership process (Howard, 2016; Kassin, 2003). This is consistent with some scholars' arguments that leadership is not conferred on a person because he/she possesses certain traits (Hamada and Morse, 2000).

2.9.3 Leaderful Leadership Theory

The leaderful leadership theory advocates that leadership should be viewed from a collaborative, not an individualistic, angle (Raelin, 2003, 2011). This leadership theory is beneficial to businesses, as it encourages conferment of leadership on everyone in a team to ensure that leadership and power are shared by all team members. The leaderful leadership model has four tenets, which emphasise that leaders should be concurrent, collective, collaborative, and compassionate (Raelin, 2011). This model aims to entrench a participative

initiative in employees. This suggests that a leaderful leadership style would promote teamwork and collaboration within an organisation (Nair, 1996; Raelin, 2003). It is, however, necessary for small business managers to motivate their teams to ensure cooperation and teamwork. Hence, leaderful leadership theory is highly relevant in the management of crises and uncertainty in small firms. Moreover, detaching leadership from personality enables leaders to focus on social interactions and behavioural change within an organisation (Crevani, Lindgren and Packendorff, 2010; Raelin, 2011). Consequently, a leaderful practice is a potent attribute in the management of crises and uncertainty in small businesses, encouraging improved teamwork and collaboration.

2.9.4 Contingency Leadership

Contingency leadership advocates that the efficacy of leadership depends on matching the appropriate leader's style with the right situation. In this regard, Fiedler (1967) asserted that leadership performance would be determined by an organisation and by the leader's skills. The effectiveness of leadership based on the contingency model depends on three factors: leader-member relations, task structure, and positional power (Lutans, 2011; Morgan, 2007; Thompson, 1967). This study focused on the organisational leadership of a small firm during a period of crises and uncertainty. The theory of contingent leadership is relevant to the study, as it argues that a leader's effectiveness depends on the situational contexts and his/her ability to understand and solve a problem(s). Hence, contingency leadership is useful in managing crises and uncertainty within a small firm such as AMYQ.

2.9.5 The Path-Goal Model of Leadership

The path-goal model advocates engagement of a suitable leadership behaviour or style to manage a work environment and motivate employees to achieve organisational goals (House, 1974). This model is based on Vroom's (1964) expectancy theory, which asserts that an individual's action depends on the expected benefits of the achieved results. House (1971) argued that leaders should define the path to be followed by their team to attain the organisation's goals and objectives. This implies that a leader's approach and behaviour may be assessed based on the impact it has on the subordinates. Armstrong (2012) noted that leaders should motivate their subordinates or teams to achieve organisational goals using four leadership strategies: supportive, participative, achievement-oriented, and

directive. This is reasonable, as it is challenging to use only one strategy to capture the essence and process of leadership (Northouse, 2013; Ridley, 2003). The path-goal model is relevant to this study because it emphasises the need for leaders to adopt a suitable behaviour/style to motivate employees and manage the work environment (including crises and uncertainty) to achieve the desired organisational goals.

2.9.6 Comparison of the Different Approaches: Autocratic, Trait, Path-Goal, Contingency, and Leaderful

There are many different types of leaders and various situations in which they operate. Five leadership styles/models (autocratic leadership, trait theory; leaderful leadership; contingency leadership; and the path-goal model of leadership) are discussed in this section.

Trait theory views leadership as a factor of behavioural characteristics and human personality, although these do not confer effectiveness to the leader (Amanchukwu, Stanley and Ololube, 2015), leading to some inconsistencies in the relationship between leadership traits and leadership effectiveness. The path-goal model advocates that the leader should engage a proper leadership behaviour or style in order to manage the work environment and motivate employees to achieve organisational goals. This model is relevant to the present study because the adoption of a suitable behaviour/style by an organisation's leadership would ensure effective management of a workplace and motivate employees to achieve the desired organisational goals (Armstrong, 2012).

Contingency or Situational Leadership, on the other hand, admits that there is no one best way of leading an organisation, as the situation will determine the type of leadership style to adopt (Vera and Crossan, 2004). During a crisis, such as the managerial and financial problems being faced by AMYQ Ventures Limited, the contingency model advocates a leadership style that would enable the business owner to solve the given problems. Contingency Leadership advocates that the effectiveness of a leader depends on his/her ability to match an appropriate leadership style to the right situation. The theory of contingent leadership is suitable for managing crises and uncertainty within small firms because a leader's ability to understand and solve a problem(s) in a situational context would enhance the organisation's performance (Morgan, 2007).

The leaderful leadership model aims to entrench a participative initiative on employees within an organisation; hence, the leaderful leadership theory is also suitable for managing crises and uncertainty within a small firm, since it promotes collaboration amongst employees and compassion towards followers. The autocratic leadership approach is seen as too dictatorial and likely to make the employees withdraw from the objective of managing and solving the crisis. According to Chan et al. (2013), autocratic leadership during crises may lead to lack of team interaction and reduced employee commitment (Chen et al., 2014).

In conclusion, the review of these leadership approaches has taught me that the specific problems of staff absenteeism, demotivation, and the need to improve cash flow and profit should determine the choice of leadership style. I have also learnt that my autocratic leadership approach may not improve staff participation and involvement. Could this approach be part of the problem?

Organisational crises management models are discussed in the next section.

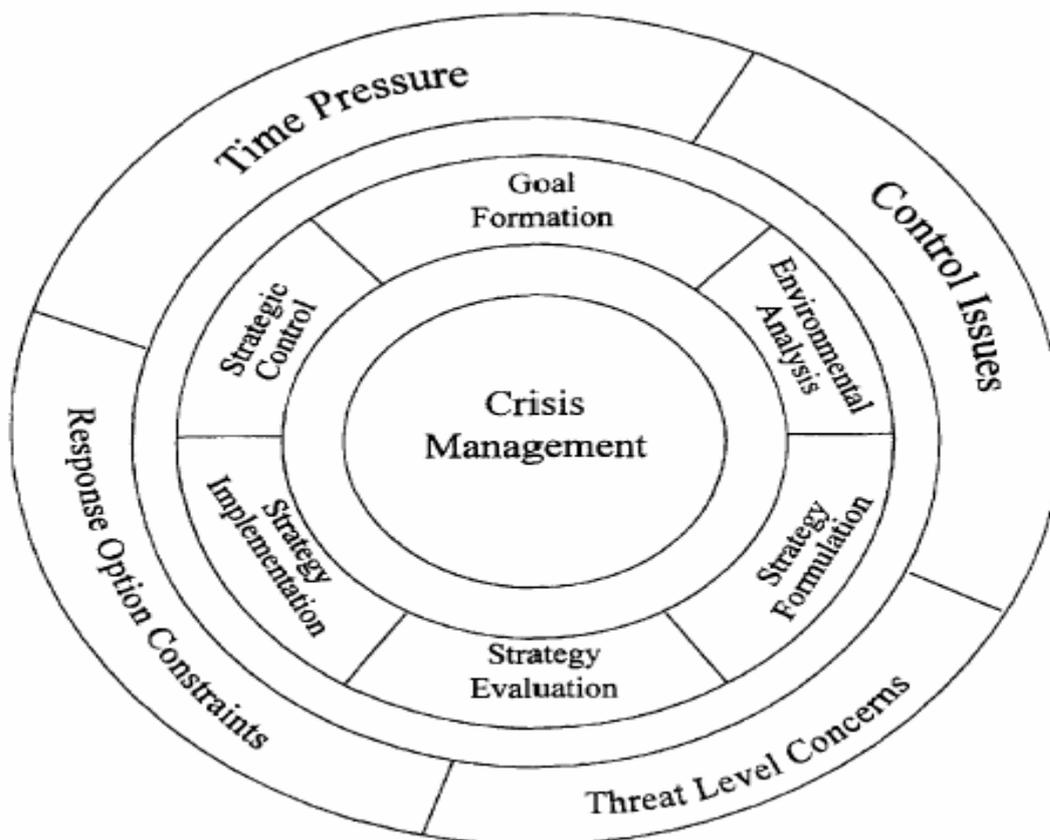
2.10 Crisis Management Models

It is necessary for managers and organisational leadership to formulate strategies that are suitable for managing the circumstances and crises confronting their organisations. The concept of crisis covers disaster situations, processes and time periods, and other organisational issues which require remedial action (Lalonde, 2011). Generally, crises have potentially harmful impacts on individuals, organisations, and society. The concept of crisis is vast, encompassing different interpretations and notions (Boin, 2005; Lalonde, 2011). James and Wooten (2005) described business crises as situations which may arouse an adverse reaction from stakeholders, and thereby threaten the financial well-being, reputation, and survival of a firm.

It is necessary to identify the nature and types of crises faced by a firm before determining the most suitable crisis management strategies suitable. Various crisis management models have been developed. The literature revealed four factors which may influence an organisation's crisis management practice, which are: time pressure, control issues, threat

level concerns, and response option constraints (Appelbaum et al., 2012; Baran and Adelman, 2010; Barton, 2007; Beaubien, 2016; Boin, 2006; Bundy et al., 2017; Burnett, 1998). Burnett (1998) viewed these factors as constraints which may adversely impact on the attitude of the leader towards the management of organisational crisis, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Crisis Management Model



Source: Burnett (1998, p. 481)

Figure 1 shows Burnett's (1998) Crisis Management Model. Burnett (1998) asserted that the strategic management of a crisis occurs when the time pressure, control issues, threat level concerns, and response option constraints of the crisis event have been addressed. Burnett's (1998) Crisis Management Model also has six steps within the inner circle, consisting of goal formation, environmental analysis, strategy formulation, strategy evaluation, strategy implementation, and strategic control (Figure 1). The six inner circle steps of the model can be categorised into three stages, namely: crisis management preparation or identification, confrontation, and reconfiguration. Based on this model, the preparation stage involves goal

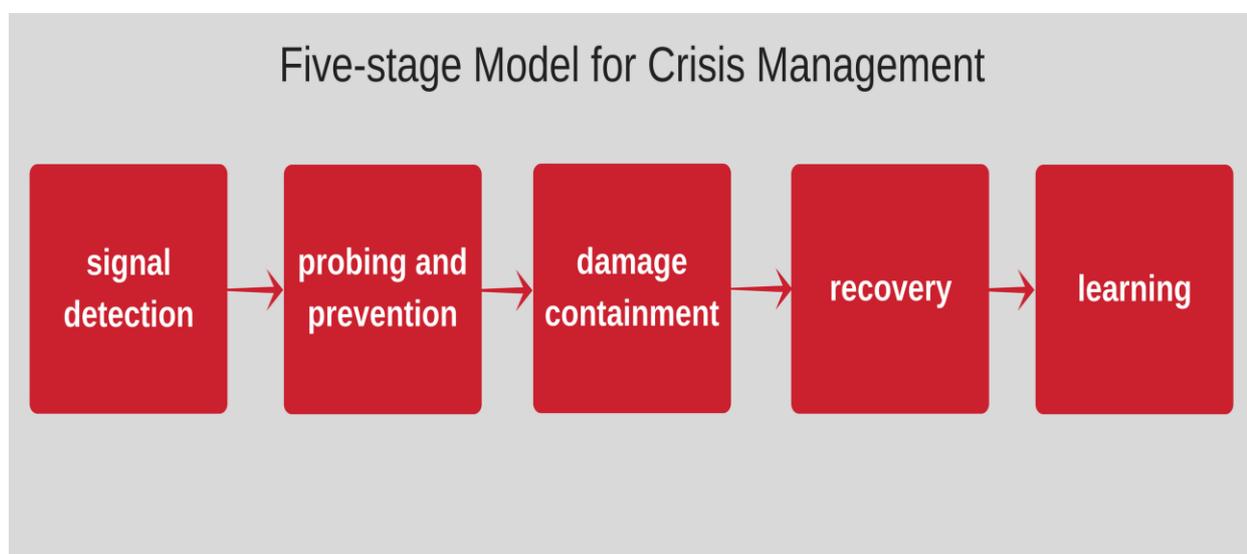
formation and environmental analysis; the confrontation stage entails strategy formulation and strategy evaluation; and the reconfiguration stage involves strategy implementation and strategic control (see Figure 1).

Burnett's (1998) Crisis Management Model is relevant to this study, which focuses on the organisational leadership of a small firm during crises and uncertainty. An organisation's leadership should be involved in the three abovementioned stages of crisis management. The use of tasks or features within the inner circle of the crisis management model provides an organisation with the opportunity to manage a crisis (Burnett, 1998).

Furthermore, Coombs (1996) identified three stages of crisis: the pre-crisis stage, the crisis stage, and the post-crisis stage. These three stages can be engaged to manage crises within business organisations. The pre-crisis stage involves processes of crisis prevention, planning, and crisis management. A firm should be proactive during this stage to prevent a crisis. The crisis stage covers the actions of an organisation's leadership to respond to and cope with crises. The post-crisis stage starts after the resolution of the crisis.

Mitroff (2003, 2005) developed a five-stage model for crisis management, consisting of the signal detection stage; the prevention and preparation stage; the containment and damages stage; the business recovery stage; and the learning and reflection stage (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Five-stage model for crisis management



Source: Mitroff (2003, 2005)

The first stage of Mitroff's (2003, 2005) crisis management model is the signal detection stage, which aims to identify crisis warning signs for probing. The second stage is a probing and prevention stage, which seeks to reduce risk factors associated with warning signs. The third stage, damage containment, seeks to limit the spread and negative impacts of situations during crises. The fourth stage, the recovery stage, focused on efforts to return to normal business operations after a crisis. The last stage, which is the learning stage, aims at learning from the crisis by reviewing the crisis management effort of the organisation (Mitroff, 2003, 2005).

Holistically, Mitroff's (2003, 2005) five-stage model for crisis management shares some similarity with Coombs' (1996) three stages of crisis (pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis). This is because stages 1 and 2 of Mitroff's model focuses on pre-crisis activities; the third stage focuses on the crisis event, and stages 4 and 5 focuses on post-crisis activities. The similarity between Mitroff's model and Coombs' three stages is that they both take cognizance of the pre-crisis phase, the crisis phase, and the post-crisis phase.

Fink (1986) emphasizes the importance of proactive planning and preparedness in anticipation of crises rather than relying solely on reactive measures. The strategies and frameworks for identifying potential crisis scenarios, developing response plans, coordinating communication efforts, and mitigating the impact of crises on organizations should be very clear to employees and their management. Adverse effects of crises can be mitigated through strategic foresight and comprehensive crisis planning.

Gonzalez-Herrero and Pratt (1996) proposed an integrated symmetrical model for crisis communication management. The authors argue that effective crisis communication should be characterized by openness, dialogue, and mutual understanding between organizational leadership and employees. The symmetrical model emphasizes the importance of two-way communication and suggests that organizations should not only disseminate information but also actively listen to and engage with other stakeholders. They therefore propose a six-step process for crisis communication management, which includes pre-crisis planning, crisis recognition, crisis diagnosis, strategic response, post-

crisis evaluation, and learning. AMYQ might gain insights and practical guidance for to effectively handle crises and maintain positive relationships with employees through transparent and interactive communication strategies.

Learning is vital in managing crises and uncertainty in a small firm. Hence, leaders of small firms should improve themselves and encourage learning within their organisations (Rowden, 2001). The leadership of a small firm can learn from a crisis because every experience is an opportunity to learn. Moreover, learning from crises is a continuous process. The literature emphasised that the leader of an organisation is responsible for building a learning organisation for the betterment of the firm through past experiences (Crossan and Bedrow, 2003; Lengnick-Hall and Inocencio-Gray, 2013). The leadership of small firms should create an environment that is conducive for learning, innovation, and creativity (Auster, Wylie and Valente, 2005; Balogun, Hailey, and Cleaver, 2015; Leavy, 1997; Limerick, Passfield and Cunnington, 1994). This is beneficial because learning can improve a firm's capability to manage crises and uncertainty effectively.

This section has discussed several crisis management models, including those developed by Mitroff (2003, 2005), Burnett (1998), Gonzalez-Herrero and Pratt (1996), Coombs (1996), and Fink (1986). Generally, crisis management models are beneficial to organisations and their leadership because such models can enhance the understanding and successful management of organisational crises. Specifically, Burnett's (1998) crisis management model, Coombs' (1996) crisis life cycle, and Mitroff's (2003, 2005) five-stage model for crisis management are relevant to the present study, which focused on the organisational leadership of a small firm during crises and uncertainty. Themes which emerged from discussions on crisis management models are that: (1) organisation leadership should be involved in all stages of crisis management; (2) leadership of a small firm can learn from a crisis because every experience is an opportunity to learn; and (3) a useful crisis management framework should take cognizance of three crisis phases: pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis. It is therefore beneficial for leaders of small firms to be able to identify impending crises and be proactive in managing their impacts for the benefit of their organisations and stakeholders. Leadership competencies are required to be able to identify impending crises and act appropriately during crises. This shows that there is a connection

between crisis management and leadership competencies. Hence, leadership competencies are relevant in managing crises and uncertainty within business organisations. Crisis management and leadership competencies are considered in the next section.

2.11 Crisis Management and Leadership Competencies

Information about companies in crises is published daily on various media, including television, radio, newspaper, magazines, and social media. An organisational crisis may include events such as fraud, sexual harassment, employee discrimination and lack of morale, lack of working capital, product recalls, and continuous loss-making or delayed payments (Hale, 2013). Crises that are not resolved promptly may have a negative and long-lasting impact on a firm's bottom line, market position, and human resources systems (Garcia, 2006; Groh, 2014; Hale, 2013).

Most executives and managers may be aware of the potential causes of organisational crises and their negative impacts, but their formal training and experience may not give them the right exposure to crisis management. It is essential to effectively manage communication and public relations during an organisation's crisis, but other aspects of the firm's activities (such as managing the change process, taking risks, and fostering organisational agility) should also be well-managed during this time (Herbane, 2010; James and Wooten, 2005; Lalonde, 2011; Shaw and Harrald, 2004). Hence, the leadership of small firms must be able to successfully navigate through different phases of crisis to ensure effective management of crises and uncertainty within their organisations. Leadership competencies are required to ensure that organisational leadership can successfully navigate through different phases of a crisis.

Leadership competencies are leadership skills and behaviour, which can impact positively on a leader's performance to enhance organisational performance (McShane, Sharma, and von Gilnow, 2013). Some leadership competencies may be relevant to all organisations, but it is essential for an organisation to identify the leadership attributes that are essential for management of crises and uncertainty within a small firm. Pearson and Clair (1998) argued that an understanding of the four features of a crisis (referred to as the 4Cs) can enhance the handling of a crisis event: (1) cause(s) of the crisis, (2) consequences of the crisis, (3)

cautionary measures for prevention, and (4) coping mechanisms for responding to the crisis. However, Wooten and James (2008) believed that relevant leadership competencies are necessary to complement the 4Cs identified by Pearson and Clair (1998).

It is imperative to understand the type of crisis being faced by a firm to determine the leadership competencies required to manage the crisis and its impacts. Wooten and James (2008) highlighted leadership competencies that are useful in managing an organisational crisis, and these include effective communication, good decision-making, and risk assessment. This shows that there are several leadership competencies which are relevant in managing organisational crises and uncertainty.

McShane, Sharma, and von Gilnow (2013) identified 14 leadership competencies, which are categorised into eight groups: personality, self-concept, drive, integrity, leadership motivation, knowledge of the business, cognitive and practical intelligence, and emotional intelligence (Table 6). I believe that these leadership competencies are relevant in managing crises and uncertainty within small firms (including AMYQ Ventures Limited) because personality, self-concept, drive, and integrity are crucial in improving an organisation's decision-making, value, and performance.

Table 6: Leadership Competencies

1	Personality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extroversion, conscientiousness, and other traits
2	Self-concept	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive self-evaluation • High self-esteem and self-efficacy • Internal locus of control
3	Drive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inner motivation to pursue goals. • Inquisitiveness, action-oriented
4	Integrity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Truthfulness • Consistency in words and action
5	Leadership Motivation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High need for socialised power to achieve organisational goals.
6	Knowledge of the business	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand external environment • Aid intuitive decision making
7	Cognitive and practical intelligence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Above-average cognitive ability • Ability to solve real-world problems
8	Emotional intelligence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perceiving, assimilating, understanding, and regulating emotions

Source: McShane, Sharma and von Gilnow (2013, p. 363)

The literature has also revealed that leadership action during crises could reflect the competence and capabilities of an organisation (Bundy et al., 2017; James and Wooten, 2010; Wooten and James, 2008). Wooten and James (2008) identified five key leadership competencies required during and after an organisational crisis. These leadership competencies are: (1) building an environment of trust; (2) reforming the organisation's mindset; (3) identifying obvious and obscure vulnerabilities of the organisation; (4) making wise and rapid decisions and taking courageous action; and (5) learning from crisis to effect change (Wooten and James, 2008). Further studies by James and Wooten (2010) revealed that appropriate leadership skills are necessary during each phase or stage of the crisis. Identifying the stage of the crisis will allow researchers and other stakeholders to know the suitable leadership skill to use for practical impact during the process of crisis management.

Figure 3: Stages of organisational crisis (adapted from Wooten and James, 2008)

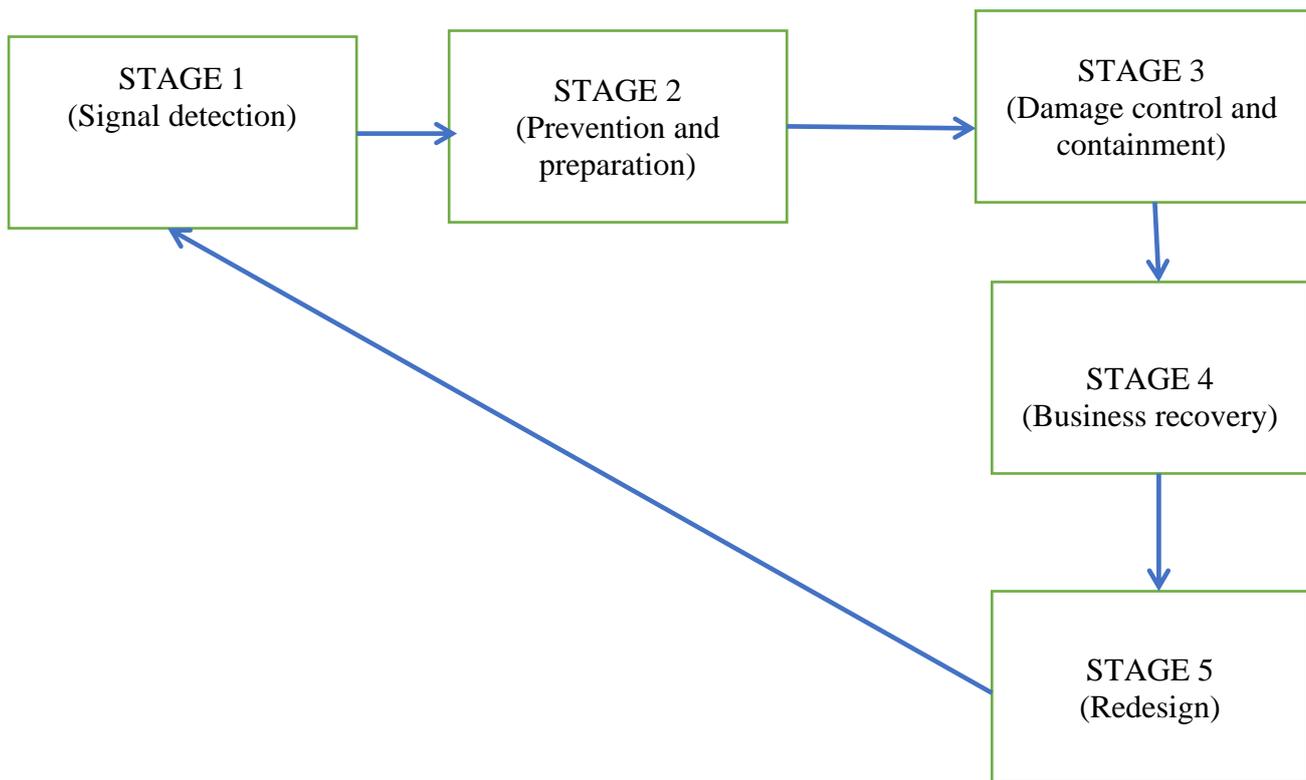


Table 7: James and Wooten’s (2010) conceptual model of leadership competencies at different stages of crisis

Crisis Stage	Identification	Competencies
STAGE 1	Signal Detection	Understanding, sense-making, perspective-taking, and sharing
STAGE 2	Prevention and Preparation	Creativity and issue selling, agility
STAGE 3	Containment and Damage Control	Communicating, risk-taking, and decision-making
STAGE 4	Business Recovery	Promoting organisational resilience
STAGE 5	Redesign	Learning and reflection

Human Resource Development (HRD) plays a vital role in the development of an organisation's leadership competencies. These competencies can be enhanced by aligning the firm's HRD activities with its strategic goals and crisis management policy (McCracken and Wallace, 2000). It is therefore reasonable to conclude that leadership competencies are relevant in managing crises and uncertainty in a small firm; and an organisation's leadership competencies can be enhanced by fostering a learning culture (Ruona, Lynham, and Chermack, 2003).

2.12 Risk and Change Management in Small Firms

Organisations face uncertainties in the business environment, and the riskiness of the business determines the earnings of the company (Liu, 2012; Shimpi, 2001). Managing these risks has been the focus of many businesses, especially small firms that have no established organisational structure and risk management strategies (Clark, 2011). Small firms face a higher risk of insolvency than large organisations (Ahmad and Tahir, 2011; Clark, 2011) and therefore require adequate and appropriate risk management strategies. According to Fadun (2013), uncertainties and consequences (two components of risk) affect organisations in a variety of ways; and economic instability and unpredictable growth issues have negatively affected small firms in Nigeria. Therefore, risks may be threats, and may also be opportunities (Damodaran, 2008; Hillson and Murray-Webster, 2004; Kannan and Thangavel, 2008).

Owner-managers of small firms must be willing to manage uncertainties to mitigate the negative impact they may have on the business while utilising the value-creating opportunities they may present (Altman, Sabato, and Wilson, 2008; D'Arcy and Brogan, 2001). Risk management in small firms presents an opportunity for controlling and managing risk exposure so that the firm's objectives will be achieved (Henschel and Gao, 2010; Smit and Watkins, 2012). However, this is difficult for small firms for two main reasons. First, small firms have no real structures and experience in risk management issues. According to Kelkar (2011), small firms are weak in terms of management structure, decision-making, and business planning. Secondly, risk management lies mostly in the

domain of the owner-manager of the firm. Since the perception of risk is dominated by an inexperienced business owner, there is a high chance that the owner's risk perception and attitude will fall short of the required risk management objectives. According to Fadun (2013, p.23), small firms in Nigeria are affected by risks such as "regulatory and compliance risks; inventory risk; crisis risk; global-view risks; market risk; customer relations risks; intimidation risks; operational-economic risks; capital acquisition risks; branding risks; inventory risks; and continuity risks" and these risks are useful in sustaining the growth or otherwise of the small firm (Fatai, 2010).

Various elements of organisational change will only be successful when key organisational activities such as communication, information gathering, and learning are involved (Bamford and Forrester, 2003). While managing the various risk issues, business owners must pay attention and identify and implement changes that are necessary for the firm. It is essential for small firms to identify the critical stakeholders affected by the initiated change and ensure their participation in the change process. Effective communication, support, negotiation, and influence may be necessary to reduce the resistance to the proposed changes (Hughes, 2006; Dowson, 2003). Employees' involvement in the change process will be more beneficial to the organisation when it is voluntary than when it is imposed by the business owner or manager.

2.13 Personal and Organisational Questions Posed by Literature

The literature on managerial guilt spoke to me in different ways. As a member of the organisation and the leader therein, I sometimes felt guilty about the situation my firm was in. The financial difficulties of low cashflow, dwindling profits and lack of morale of workers may even be my fault. I wondered whether my guilt proneness would lead to defensive approaches (Coombs, 1998; Marcus and Goodman, 1991) or serve as a basis for positive leadership (Amadio et al., 2007).

My training as a banker and manager of my unit supported the traditional leadership style, which commands dispassionately. Could it be that my leadership style was contributing to employee demotivation and increased absenteeism? My leadership was individualistic and authoritative and showed a heroic image of the leader (Raelin, 2003). I became worried that

my use of my bank manager approaches was not working well here and a more pragmatic and collaborative approach might be needed to lead my team out of the crisis.

As I reflected on the financial and managerial problems of my business, the research of Wooten and James (2008) came to mind, as these authors emphasised that critical leadership competencies are necessary during a crisis. I wondered whether I have the espoused crisis leadership competencies of (1) building an environment of trust; (2) reforming the organisation's mindset; (3) identifying obvious and obscure vulnerabilities of the organisation; (4) making wise and rapid decisions and taking courageous action; and (5) learning from crisis to effect change (Wooten and James, 2008). These competencies may be relevant for my learning and growth as a business owner, and for the sustainability of my firm.

In my reflections, I also needed to know whether I have resilient attributes that would support my organisation at this time. Sometimes it looked easy to quit and walk away, but according to Herbane (2019), the resilience of a small firm is dependent on the business owner being able to dig in and use his networks, better planning, learning, and location decisions to improve the business. These would be necessary for addressing the poor cash flow and low profitability of the business.

As I reflected on my shortcomings and the lack of positive results while using my experience and skills of autocratic leadership, I came again to the realization that I needed to make some adjustments that would have a positive impact on my firm. I also recalled my DBA lectures and readings concerning action learning. Action learning is an effective method of learning and developing leadership skills, particularly for senior-level managers in developed countries (Masango-Muzindutsi et al., 2018). For small businesses, owner-managers should take this approach to improve their leadership skills and develop appropriate competencies directly related to the day-to-day problems that their business is facing (Gabrielsson et al., 2010; Jones et al., 2014). I therefore wondered whether this research methodology would be useful to me and my business.

2.14 Summary of Chapter Two

In this chapter, I reviewed relevant concepts regarding the transition from being an employee to being an employer and business owner. The chapter also provided the theoretical context for this research, as it covered managerial guilt, organisational leadership, small businesses, and crisis management in small firms. Action learning was presented and considered as a possible means of learning about AMYQ Ventures Limited's problems. The literature review within this chapter enabled me to identify specific questions that would help solve the problems being faced by the business. These questions enabled me to come up with the aims/objectives of the research, which were personal and organisational. The next chapter provides a justification of the research methodology and design chosen to answer the research questions.

Chapter 3

Research Methodology and Design

3. Introduction

In the previous chapter, I explored the importance of small businesses to the economy and how business owners are responsible for managing their organisational problems. The literature review touched on areas that are critical to leadership during times of crisis and uncertainty and facilitated the framing of my research questions, which aimed to address AMYQ Ventures Limited's problems. This chapter aims to explain the methodology and design adopted for the research. It covers the procedure that I utilised during the collection and analyses of research data; and includes the theoretical and philosophical belief that supported the research and the justification for the adopted method (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2007). Creswell (2013) wrote that research methodology encompasses the experiences of the researcher, which affect the mode of collecting and analysing the research data. The chosen methodology also improved the comparability of this research and its methods with other research. This chapter elucidates the methodology and design utilised in the research and covers the research philosophy, approach, strategy, and methods of data collection and analysis.

3.1 Aim of this Research and Research Questions

As noted in Chapter 2, the review of literature and personal reflections about my individual and my company's financial and managerial problems led to questions concerning my ability to lead the organisation.

The main research questions identified were as follows:

1. What actions are necessary to manage the employees for better motivation?
2. What actions should be taken to reduce employee absenteeism?
3. What actions are needed to increase the revenue and profitability of the business?

These reflections and questions helped me to identify two areas of objectives, categorised as personal and practical, as follows:

Personal:

1. To learn and develop as an action learner.
2. To work in an action learning set.
3. To learn how to manage employees and financial difficulties.

Practical:

1. To act to create a motivated workforce and reduce absenteeism.
2. To act to improve liquidity, cash flow, and profit.
3. To act to create networks for the business and improve resilience.

3.2 Background Information on AMYQ Ventures Limited

The business environment in Nigeria is highly dynamic and unpredictable. AMYQ Ventures Limited is a small firm that is involved in agro-dealership in Nigeria. The company markets and sells agro-related products, including fertiliser and chemicals. The company had participated in the Nigeria Federal Government program, known as the Growth Enhancement Support Scheme (GESS), for 2 years. The GESS aimed to subsidise fertiliser and other agro-inputs to farmers to improve agricultural production and reduce the poverty rate in Nigeria. The company is now faced with poor liquidity due to the federal government's non-payment of the GESS subsidy for 2014 to 2017. AMYQ also has uncollected receivables from its customers. In addition, the nation's political turmoil has led to changes and inconsistency in government policies. Moreover, the federal government has not run the GESS since the last change in administration in 2015. The income from GESS accounted for over 80% of AMYQ's revenue. The company is indebted to Skye Bank to the tune of eighty million Naira (N80m), which is about US \$160,000. The company also owes over six months of staff salary; hence, staff morale is very low.

Employees of AMYQ are showing low morale, and this is evidenced by high absenteeism. The company's poor liquidity and huge financial debts constitute crises and uncertainty for the organisation. The level of uncertainty faced by the company has increased due to the devaluation of the Naira by over 100% (Central Bank of Nigeria, 2017), which has had a significant impact on the cost of fertiliser procurement in the market. Hence, the company cannot procure fertiliser for distribution and sales; nor can it pay staff salaries when due.

The company's challenges and constraints prompted this research, which will be beneficial to the organisation's leadership during crises and uncertainty. While awaiting the payment of the outstanding GESS subsidy by the Federal Government of Nigeria, I wish to sustain the company and avoid its failure. The thesis has thus explored the organisational leadership of AMYQ Ventures Limited during crises and uncertainty.

3.3 My Epistemological Position

Epistemology is concerned with the theory of suitable knowledge in a particular area of study (Saunders et al., 2007). My epistemological assumption is that true reality can be observed in order for knowledge to be created. This implies that the organisational crisis and its impact could be observed and reflected upon during the research. In addition, I acted as an observer to identify relationships and actions/inactions of employees that will be beneficial to the organisation during this crisis. My epistemological assumptions therefore covered the methods and validation of knowledge related to social reality. The aim of the research was to identify appropriate leadership actions which the management of small businesses such as AMYQ Ventures Limited can use in solving their company problems during times of crisis and uncertainty.

Qualitative research, as opined by Creswell (2009), requires that researchers be near the participants being studied. In examining the crisis and uncertainty within the organisation, I had close collaboration with the employees of the company. The employees of AMYQ Ventures Limited also had different perspectives about the crisis and lent their voices toward understanding the problems being faced by the organisation and its management. The information provided by these participants represented first-hand, objective knowledge during the study. I am also the owner-manager of the organisation. I am an insider within this company and worked in collaboration with employees of the organisation.

My research had its basis in the social constructivist paradigm, since it aimed to understand the world (the organisation - AMYQ Ventures Limited) in which we worked (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, and Jackson, 2012; Creswell, 2013). Denzin and Lincon (2011) and Mertens (2010) also described this as interpretivism. This philosophy allowed me to listen and understand the perspectives of the participants and their assessments and interpretations of

the crisis and uncertainty being faced by the organisation (Blumberg, Cooper, and Schindler, 2005; Herbane, 2010). The interpretive lens allowed for the understanding of respondents' interpretations concerning the world around them. Therefore, this paradigm was appropriate in assessing the risks and crises within AMYQ Ventures Limited (Blumberg et al., 2005) and finding appropriate leadership competencies that would lead to positive outcomes for the company and the employees. I relied upon the diverse views of the participants concerning the problems of AMYQ Ventures Limited during the research. From these perspectives, I was able to draw insights from the employees' experiences. By sharing experiences with the participants (employees), various subjective meanings of the organisational crisis and uncertainty of AMYQ Ventures Limited were unravelled. I used the participants' views to help me understand the situation. Most importantly, I positioned myself as a researcher and as a worker in the organisation; and used my understanding of the company's background to interpret the historical and cultural settings of the participants and their views about the company's crisis and uncertainty.

3.4 Ontology

Ontology is the underlying world view or belief system and the nature of reality (Saunders et al., 2007). Moustakas (1994) argued that participants in research would have different experiences and views. The participants had multiple realities (Creswell, 2009) due to their different philosophical orientations (Collis and Hussey, 2009). This was a subjectivist view, since it was believed that the social phenomena being experienced by the organisation would be interpreted differently due to the diverse perceptions of the employees. My meetings with the employees and the time I spent with them improved my understanding of the organisation and its problems from different perspectives. It also afforded me the opportunity to learn about their emotional connections with themselves and the organisation.

3.5 Axiology

This relates to the values I brought to the research study. My values and biases have been reported in an open and understandable manner during each stage of the research process. The credibility of my research results was influenced by my values throughout the process. This implies that my values may have led me to certain conclusions that may be different

from other researchers who have differing values but have worked in a similar organisation. Saunders et al. (2007) stated that researchers' values are the guiding reasons for their actions. Thus, they show their axiological assumptions by clearly articulating their values and biases in support of the decisions, judgments, and actions that they have taken. My actions strengthened the research, especially regarding transparency and minimisation of bias. My honesty and desire to seek solutions that would help the company to solve its problems was a positive way of also improving employee welfare and morale in the organisation. I was aware that the University of Liverpool places a high value on knowing that research has been conducted ethically. I supported this by ensuring that the University Research Ethics Committee's approval was received before data collection. My openness in extending the invitation of voluntary participation to the employees also showed that I was willing to work with those who felt that they would be useful to the research without having any negative thoughts for those who might wish to opt out.

3.6 Research Approach

Denzin and Lincoln (2011) posited that qualitative inquiry has been changing over the years, and this evolution has seen changes from social construction to interpretivism, and to social justice (Creswell, 2013). This research aimed to make sense of issues concerning AMYQ Ventures Limited, interpreting them, and solving an organisational problem. The company was faced with a severe financial (liquidity) crisis and uncertainty due to non-payment of monies from their debtors and dwindling employee morale. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) posited that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings and use feedback from people to interpret phenomena and give solutions. Therefore, this research was qualitative in nature. Qualitative research is one of the best choices of approach when dealing with social or human problems, especially when situated within the context and surroundings of the participants (Marshall and Rossman, 2010) and human activities or the impact of people's decision-making (Johansen, Aggerholm, and Frandsen, 2012). Quantitative methods were not used because there was no intention to test a theory by proving or refuting a hypothesis. Also, mixed method research (which uses both quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques) was not utilised due to time constraints.

Creswell (2013) argued that researchers are vital instruments of their research by observing, examining research documents, and interviewing participants. I positioned myself first as a member of staff (owner-manager) of the organisation. I was involved in the day-to-day running of the business and understand the history and vision of the company. My experience working in the company was necessary for the research process. Also, this enabled me to know the best ways to gain access to the employees (participants), company documents such as manuals, receipts, and bank records, and supplier records. By observing and recording my findings, I played a crucial role in the research. Another data collection process was through official and unofficial interviews of the participants.

Multiple forms of data were collected through the 360-degree evaluation of me as the owner-manager, my interviews of employees, action learning set deliberations, and observations and document review. The different data collection methods were necessary within my qualitative research approach in order to avoid relying on only one data source (Creswell, 2013; LeCompte and Schensul, 1999; Marshall and Rossman, 2010). Methodological triangulation allows researchers to rely on more than one source of data, thus improving the quality and integrity of the research findings (Joslin and Müller, 2016; Heale and Forbes, 2013).

The diverse perspectives of the participants are necessary for qualitative research, and this was useful while interacting with the employees of the organisation and making sense of their stories (Hatch, 2002). Leadership performance in an organisation affects that organisation's performance. Studies revealed that organisational leaders play a significant role in organisations' development in terms of improving employee loyalty, commitment and trust, and profitability (Hartog and Koopman, 2001). Some organisations do well in specific metrics due to their leadership, while others perform poorly due to poor management. Often, the quality of followers' performance reflects the quality of the leaders guiding the organisation. The rating of leaders by their followers may be subjective due to differing follower experiences, contextual factors, and bias concerning the leader's behaviour (Hansbrough, Lord and Schyns, 2015). However, my reliance on participants' feedback about me as the organisational leader or owner-manager of the organisation, including other management staff, was free from bias, knowing that differing perspectives

would exist among the employees. According to Scullen, Mount, and Goff (2000, pp. 963), subordinates' ratings of organisational leadership, especially concerning human attributes such as "motivates others", "builds relationships" and "listens to others," are 62% different from actual leadership behaviours due to "idiosyncratic rater effects" (e.g., bias). Due to the need to involve employees of AMYQ Ventures Limited, I believed that collaborating with them in an action learning project would be beneficial to the organisation and all concerned.

3.7 Action Learning Research

Action learning is a research methodology that supports a real time search for solutions in a community or organisation (Pedler, 2008). It supports people to learn about their actions and inactions and use their experiences to enhance and improve performance and learning (Pedler, 2008; Revans, 2011). By supporting managers' and business owners' decision-making, action learning has been known to be effective in building and improving leadership (Leonard and Lang, 2010).

According to Cowan (2012), Action Learning research is a process of insightful questioning and reflective listening. It helps in tackling problems through a process that starts with asking questions to understand and clarify the nature of the problem. This is followed by reflecting and identifying possible solutions, and only then acting. The action learning questions have great importance because they build group dialogue and cohesiveness, generate innovative and systems thinking, and enhance learning results for the members of the learning set, individually and collectively as an organisation.

Action Learning recognises the following formula:

Learning = Programmed knowledge + the ability to ask 'insightful' questions, or $L = P + Q$

This equation emphasises that:

Members of an organisation can find solutions for the firm; the collective knowledge of learners is the critical resource for learning and leading; people can learn on the job and generate the necessary knowledge to solve problems; and action facilitates learning. AL is all about using a "learning by doing" approach and has been found to be useful in major national and international organisations. It is also useful for small companies.

Action learning is a popular intervention for leadership and organisational development and leads to tangible outcomes relevant to real organisational problems (Boak et al., 2020; Gold and Pedler, 2022; Weinstein, 1999; Revans, 2011). According to Cowan (2012), action learning can be described as a continuous group-based process of enquiry, engagement, learning and reflection where a group of peers meet regularly under the guidance of a trained facilitator over an extended time. Pedlar et al. (2005) defined action learning as a method of enquiry that aims to improve individual and organisational development. Action learning encourages the participants to bring real problems to the discussion with the objective of generating new and creative ways of dealing with complex organisational problems, and by so doing, learning through the development of practical solutions that are implemented for the benefit of the participants and the organisation (Molineux et al., 2020; Weinstein, 1999).

Action learning discussions are carried out within a small group of people (sets) and participants discuss their problems in a constant back-and-forth questioning and answering process that elicits critical thinking, dialogue, and reflection. These encourage the generation of ideas and clarification of assumptions (Jones et al., 2014), and use of the same to improve understanding of the problems. In addition, the process of action learning encourages learners to reflect on and learn from their own experiences and those of their peers for the benefit of the organisation (Ram and Trehan, 2009).

3.8 The Role of Action Learning in Solving Small Business Problems

Although many question the use of action learning for small firms, the action learning literature has a great deal of helpful advice on when and in what circumstances action learning may be useful and relevant for a company (e.g. Donnenberg 1999; Pedler 2008). Action learning may be successfully practised in an SME that has a traditional top-down corporate culture. It is this reflective learning that allows small business owners to identify constraints in the business environment that they operate, which helps them to reexamine their assumptions and worldviews (Schon, 1990). In times of crisis, small business owners use reflection as a tool and support of actions that would positively affect their position.

Action learning also has a leadership development component, as members of the action learning team develop their skills of listening, collaboration, insightful questioning (Pedler, 2008). It allows managers and leaders in a small firm to try out suggestions for reaching an objective, even though some of these suggestions may need to be tried more than once, especially when the objectives are not clear (Kinsey, 2011). Action learning has therefore been shown to be appropriate for big organisations and small businesses whereby the learning by doing approach is incorporated for the benefit of the organisation. Pedler (2008) posited that action learning is a powerful process of organisational reform, especially during times of crisis, as it allows managerial roles and responsibilities to be re-examined for the benefit of the organisation. Of course, its most powerful impact is the synergy of simultaneously developing personal, organisational, and business knowledge, thereby removing the sources of frustration in that organisation (Coghlan and Pedler, 2006; Pedler, 2008; Pedler, Burgoyne, and Brook, 2005).

3.9 Action Learning Set: Start of the Research Journey

Lewin (1946) and Avison et al. (2009) agree that a doctoral practitioner may set out to create an action learning set to learn and attempt to change the situation in which the organisation has found itself. I created a learning set of 10 participants in September 2014 with the aim of encouraging employee participation in finding a solution to the identified problems. The team was to meet on a weekly basis for two months, at a time suitable for all members. This 60-day schedule was to enable me to collate enough data and quickly implement suggestions therefrom. My role was that of a facilitator, as the members did not have any previous action learning experience. Although it was my first experience of action learning, I had already studied this approach in the DBA classroom and read some articles related to it. I also had the opportunity to call my thesis supervisor for advice when needed. In our first meeting, I introduced my thesis and the research questions so far developed. I made it known to the participants that the sets were free to validate, reject and even amend the research questions as they deemed fit. I also encouraged the set meetings to be lively and participative and to involve the members, as they would be coming up with their own understanding of the issues being faced by the company and sharing their ideas with others.

According to Revan (2011), small groups of people can come together to consider change and uncertainty. Ultimately, the learning (L) emanating from this group would be equal to the sum of programmed knowledge (P) and insightful questioning (Q). Although 10 employees willingly agreed to participate in the set meetings, there were days when we had less than that number in attendance. Two members of the set later ceased to participate in the meetings because they resigned and left the company one month after the set formation. They only attended four set meetings.

3.10 Keeping a Record of my Reflective Notes

The reflective notes that I made during the project served as key material for the thesis. This enabled me to keep a record of participants' verbal and non-verbal reactions and responses to my questions. Important thoughts that came to mind during the reflective research journey were also recorded and formed the basis of my personal reflections, which are presented in Chapter 6.

3.11 Data Generation and Analysis

Data generation in this project was from different sources and was aimed at improving the quality of data and academic rigour. As the researcher, I was involved in the day-to-day business activities, especially those that were related to the research project. Marshall and Rossman (2010) suggested that qualitative researchers should focus mainly on four methods of data gathering. These include participation in the day-to-day activities of the system, direct observations, in-depth interviews of research participants, and the review of organisational documents and culture materials. Most of my data generation and intervention were through participation in the running of the business and doing my daily work. First, I gathered data from the action learning set meetings that I attended. Being the facilitator gave me the opportunity to hear directly from set members and take notes firsthand. I listened and learnt from their contributions and at times sought further clarifications from the team to ensure that I was not making any wrong assumptions. I continued by making daily decisions and attending internal meetings, as well as external meetings with banks and suppliers. Data gathering also included my observation of the teams at work, problem-solving, and decision-making about the supply of products and negotiation with our debtors. I also observed and intervened during formal and informal

meetings. For example, observations were made during our weekly meetings and informal settings such as during lunch breaks and occasionally when I gave some of my staff a lift home. During recreational activities such as Saturday soccer games with some of the company employees, I also interacted with them and got some insights into our company situation.

I took notes during the official meetings but had to update my journals after each informal meeting with the participants. While observing the employees and the system, I reflected on the impact some of my management decisions were having on the system and how I might improve the research project. However, it was initially difficult to combine and make sense of the inter-relationship between what I observed and the individual and group dynamics and organisational performance. Coghlan and Rashford (2006) claimed that organisational problem-solving and issue resolution would be enhanced when the researcher critically appraises how the actions of the participants affect the teams in which they are working, and subsequently the performance of the organisation. I eventually realised that when the employees are demoralised and demotivated at work, the performance of their teams will drop due to poor input from them. Eventually, this would affect the results of the organisation negatively.

3.12 Participant observations and document reviews

This section describes the field notes collected and the direct observations of the organisational system and research participants. The processes of the organisation were observed during the research as a means of identifying employees' behaviour and attitudes towards following instructions and policies. These included approval for buying goods, issuance of payment instructions, delivery of goods to customers, and employee welfare approval processes. Participant observations took place within the organisation, during our regular meetings, informal gatherings, workshops, and during interviews and telephone conversations.

3.13 Research Interviews

Denzin and Lincoln (2011) argued that interviews are the most widely used method of data collection for qualitative researchers. Individual, group, and semi-structured interviews

were used in this project. The interviews involved face-to-face, telephone, and email messages. Where possible, meetings were also conducted, and afforded me the opportunity to conduct group interviews with the participants. The research recordings included informal meetings, casual talks, and discussions within and outside the business environment. During the action learning set meetings, I also asked questions when necessary to gain a better understanding of the participants' context and perspectives.

3.14 My Role as the Researcher

In this section, I will briefly describe my role in this research. This is necessary to improve the understanding of essential stakeholders in this research. A clear description of my roles will highlight my organisational roles and responsibilities in the research on one hand, and my roles and responsibilities as a researcher (Janesick, 2000) on the other hand. The above will also clear doubts and give a common understanding between the participants and me (the researcher).

This was an enquiry from the inside and involved me as the researcher, immersed in the day-to-day activities of AMYQ Ventures Limited. My roles and responsibilities may be considered in two ways. I was acting as the researcher within an organisation where I played an active part as a worker in the company while also acting as a facilitator of the research process. Therefore, I had both organisational roles and researcher roles (role duality). My organisational roles and responsibility included but were not limited to: running the business; taking decisions relating to employee welfare, business income, and revenues; managing expenses; approving business investments; and negotiating with third parties such as banks, suppliers, and customers. I was also responsible for the direction of the company and the cash flow management of the firm. I had open conversations with employees during and outside the work environment. As the researcher, my roles included observing and facilitating the research process and giving the employees direction. In doing this, I ensured that employee participation was voluntary. Since non-verbal communication would need to be understood and utilised in the research, I was a good observer as well as listener.

During the research, my roles included planning the study, leading, facilitating the action learning set, designing the project, writing and reporting the thesis (O'Brien, 2001), and acting as the owner-manager of the organisation.

3.15 Participants

Action learning research promotes collaboration between the members of the learning set and enhances understanding of the organisational problems. The organisation was a small firm with 15 employees (including me as the researcher/owner-manager). All 14 employees voluntarily gave their consent to participate in this study, although only 10 agreed to be members of the learning set created for the project. The participants were aware that they were involved in a research thesis that was focused on solving their organisational problem. Their honest and committed performance during the research was useful in gathering information for the benefit of the small company (AMYQ Ventures Limited). This information elucidated the leadership actions needed by small organisations that are facing uncertainty and crisis. They were involved in interviews with me, meetings, and email correspondence. Also, telephone conversations within and outside the organisations were necessary during the research. Withdrawal from the research process by any participant was at their discretion and was not viewed harshly by me or by any of the senior staff. Participation was strictly voluntary.

3.16 Ethical Issues

It is usually advisable to consider ethical concerns among people involved in the research process. Whenever human or animal subjects are involved in research, it is entirely reasonable to expect some ethical concerns (Harriss and Atkinson, 2013). Some research processes may also bring about ethical and credibility issues about the reporting of findings from the research (Holian and Coghlan, 2013; Smyth and Holian, 2008). The ethical concerns involving the participants and me are briefly discussed below.

First, I applied for and received the approval of the company's chairman to carry out the research. The chairman is my mentor and adviser, and although he plays a non-executive role in the business, his advice over the years has been useful to me personally and to the organisation. This approval gave me the authority to commence my work. Data collection

and analyses were done honestly while treating AMYQ Ventures Limited employees with respect during the interviews and discussions. I became a good listener and diligently gained insights from our discourse. The questionnaire, which formed one of the data collection tools, was designed in a way that would not offend the respondents.

Secondly, ethical approval was sought and received from the University of Liverpool before the commencement of data collection. With the guidance of my supervisor, I also completed the Full Ethics Application Form, Participant Informed Consent Form, and Ethics Response Form for this purpose. These forms were submitted to the University of Liverpool DBA Research Ethics Committee, and appropriate approval was received. The approvals of these documents are presented in Appendix A, B, and C, respectively.

Furthermore, I received the voluntary consent of all 14 employees who took part in the study. Among these employees were three senior staff and 11 lower-level employees. Mugenda and Mugenda (2003) posited that a good researcher should ensure that participants give their voluntary consent to be part of the study. Detailed information about the nature and purpose of my research, my roles, and the expectations from the participants were shared with the voluntary participants. The employees were also aware that they could withdraw from the research at any point and would not be penalised by the company management or staff. Confidentiality procedures were also discussed and agreed on, while incentives and compensation for participating in the research were absent. All the employees and their names were coded to maintain the confidentiality of their identities. FM1, FM2, and FM3 were the three senior staff. Among the junior staff, A1, B1, C1, and D1 reported to FM1; E2, F2, G2, H2 reported to FM2; while I3, J3, and K3 reported to FM3. A1, E2, and I3 were members of my family. These codes were randomly chosen and variously used to capture different participants' contributions and feedback and for anonymity.

A new fire-proof cabinet was purchased and located within my office. It was used to store research documents and papers, and it was always locked. I was the only person with keys and access to the cabinet. Its use was to limit unauthorised access to research records and protect the integrity of the records and the identity of participants.

My interaction with the participants was through face-to-face interviews, emails, telephone calls, and meetings. All paper documents and electronic files for this research will be shredded and deleted respectively from my system after the research. Boser (2006) explored this in detail and suggested that each research stage should have ethics integrated into it to give the study some form of solid footing and foundation. Appropriate approvals were received for the research. I managed the political dynamics within the organisation using open communication. Some senior members of staff were encouraged to support the study while also expressing the desire for them to encourage the lower cadre to support the project. Employees' participation in the research process was voluntary. Non-participation did not attract any sanctions from the organisation, and participants were free to withdraw from the study at any time.

3.17 Research Design Introduction

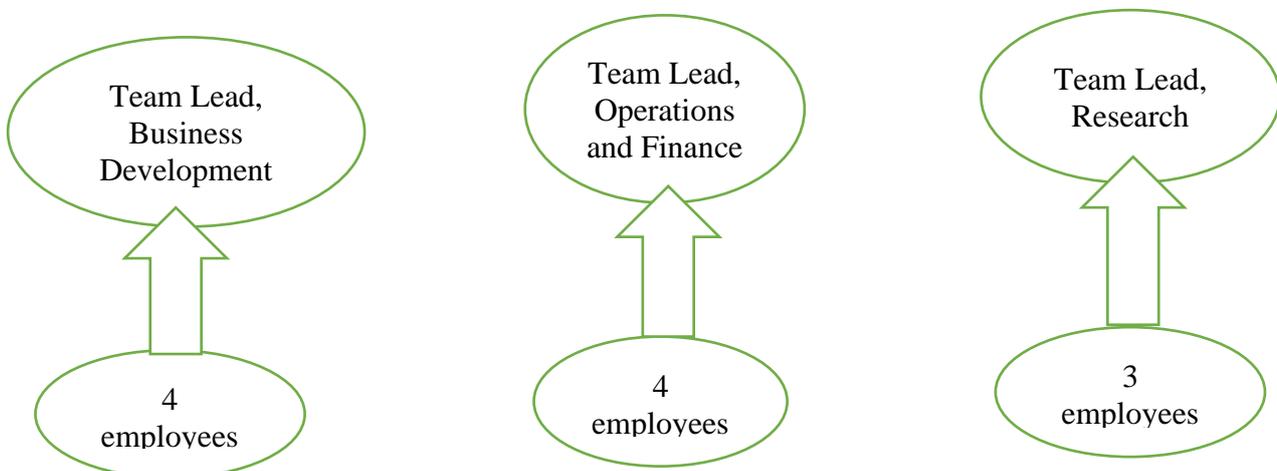
This section outlines the plan for conducting the study. The first phase of the research involved the use of a questionnaire aimed at rating me as the organisation's leadership/business owner and to ascertain whether I would be able to lead the team out of crisis and uncertainty. It was imperative to start in this way, as I questioned my leadership style and harboured feelings of guilt as to whether I was part of the problem. The second phase involved face-to-face interviews with the participants. Interview questions related to the research questions were used to understand the leadership action that would be the most useful and beneficial to the organisation. The first and second phases allowed for the collection of common themes that would be useful in the research. The third phase was the setting up of the action learning sets to further confirm or amend the research questions and aims and to come up with quick actions to be taken by the organisation. They were to share knowledge about the firm, suggest possible actions, and in so doing, lead the organisation out of the problems being faced. Here, the research questions were introduced, reiterated, and refined, if necessary, in such a way that any changes emanating from the research would be justified. The use of observation and document review was also part of the methodology design, as it gave me the opportunity to document my thoughts by way of field notes while the research was taking place.

3.17.1 Phase 1: The 360-degree Evaluation of the Owner Manager

Having noted my shortcomings in my leadership style and the need for performance appraisal in our organisation, I relied on the research findings of Chiang and Birtch (2010), who reported that small businesses’ problems may be reduced with appropriate performance measurement systems. When organisations allow the collaboration of employees in the development of performance appraisal systems, there is enhanced alignment of their operations to the business strategy and increased knowledge creation and understanding of the business goals (Groen, van de Belt, and Wilderom, 2012). Due to the urgency of the thesis and the need to meet deadlines, I agreed with the participating employees to use a rating process that would allow the employees to rate the management of the organisation. All the participating employees used this 360-degree rating process to rate me in my role as owner-manager.

Various leadership theories were identified as being relevant to leading a small firm during crisis and uncertainty. The leaderful leadership model, contingency leadership, and path-goal leadership were identified to be more appropriate for crisis leadership in a small business. I advocated for the dynamic model of leadership for small businesses, as this will allow the leader to consider the business environment, internal politics, resources, staff motivation and other relevant social factors in managing crisis and uncertainty. Mitroff (2004) proposed that the effectiveness of leadership should be known in order to identify the symptoms of crisis long before they occur so that appropriate actions can be taken to avert it.

Figure 3.17: AMYQ Employees Reporting Lines with Team Leads



Thus, 360-degree feedback appraisal of the leadership of AMYQ Ventures limited was implemented. An appraisal questionnaire was developed by adapting my questions to fit Hadley et al.'s (2009) model for measuring the efficacy of leaders to assess information and make decisions in a crisis: The C-LEAD Scale. Questions concerning communication and risk-taking were also included (Wooten and James, 2010). See Appendix E for details. The questions addressed in this questionnaire included whether I as the leader could: anticipate the impact of my decisions and actions; summarise and make sense of data received during the crisis; make decisions and recommendations with limited information; assess the impact of the crisis on stakeholders; determine and relay critical information in advance; carry others along; take critical decisions under pressure; estimate the potential injuries as a result of employee actions; and whether I was responsible for the crisis; had communicate appropriately with employees concerning the crisis; and could adapt quickly to changes in the organisation and environment.

I identified that our organisation was in stage 3 of the crisis. To this end, it was agreed that the focus of the appraisal should be on the competencies required for that stage of the crisis.

Leadership in a time of crises is expected to deliver positive outcomes for the benefit of essential stakeholders of the organisation, such as the employees and customers. Haddon et al.'s (2015) use of mixed method research using the Multi-Factor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) and qualitative interviews in analysing employees' expectations during crisis indicated that leaders must act quickly and must have open, honest, and constant communication with their followers. These results emanated from the use of qualitative in-depth interviews. The MLQ model was not used because it does not capture the feelings of employees due to its reliance on quantitative data. The next section describes phase 2 of the design.

3.17.2 Phase 2: Interviews with 14 Participants

Action learning research, which has also been referred to as research "with" people rather than research "on" them, focuses on collaboration between the participants and the researcher (Bradbury, 2010; Reason, 2001). The aim of the interviews was to ask questions related to the research questions. Fourteen interview sessions were held in the office and

supported participants and me in constructing their meanings about the identified problems. In this phase, both structured and semi-structured interviews were used. While I engaged with the participants individually, I was mindful of the effect that my position as the owner of the business might have on them. I therefore expressed an open desire to conduct friendly interviews to enable them to reduce the bias they might have towards me because I might even be the problem in the company.

With the research objectives in mind, the following questions were used as an interview guide.

Interview Questions (Appendix D):

1. What problems do you think are being faced by AMYQ Ventures Limited?
2. Have you received adequate communication from management concerning the problems?
3. What are your views concerning the role of the owner-manager in these problems?
4. What are the actions of your organisational management that may reduce the effect of the problems on employees?
5. How do you see your role in the day-to-day business?
6. What specific actions would you desire within the company?
7. Is the owner-manager competent on his job and role in the business? How?
8. Are you happy to work for AMYQ during this period? And why?
9. When did you last receive your salary?
10. Do you have an unpaid salary or allowances from AMYQ Ventures Limited?
11. Do you come to work daily?

Following these questions, employees were thanked for participating in the interviews and assured of the confidentiality of responses and the need for future interviews if need be.

The interviews were conducted within the company premises. Although I did not video these interviews, I jotted down some points that would be useful in analysing my data. Open-ended research questions were used during the interviews while I listened attentively to the participants. Creswell (2013) argued that the backbone of qualitative research is the

variety of collection of extensive data, leading to multiple sources of information. In addition to interviews, I also used observation to gather information about the actions and inactions of the employees. These sources of information improved the data quality during the research. The next section describes phase 3 of the research design.

3.17.3 Phase 3: Formation of Action Learning Sets

Although 14 members of the firm agreed to participate in the research, only 10 of them agreed to join the set. One action learning set of 10 employees was formed. Although Walia and Marks-Maran (2014) and Cowan (2012) suggest five to eight members in an action learning set, ours comprised only 10 members: this was to give all the employees equal access to the discussion and to enable all views to be heard. It was also expedient to have the 10 members in one set to allow us to act quickly and evaluate outcomes without passing these through two sets. I explained to them that this research was necessary because the company was facing uncertainty and crisis because of uncollected receipts for work done and completed for the government. AMYQ also had increasing bank debts owing to the accrued interest for the period in which the government had failed to make payments to the company. Staff morale was low, as salaries and allowances had not been paid for over 6 months. These liquidity problems were causes of concern to me. Understanding these crises may lead to a better collaboration of management and employees to seek solutions. The members of the set agreed to meet every Friday for six weeks. I attended the meetings as an observer and facilitator. It was important to attend and take note of the discussions and answer any questions that the members might have. I hoped that through this research, AMYQ Ventures Limited might learn some appropriate leadership actions and competencies that would ameliorate the impact of the problems being faced.

This research was able to allow the participants and me to understand the company problems better so that we could collaborate to solve them. Beaubien (2016) argued that when organisational leadership openly and honestly shares organisational problems with relevant stakeholders, this enhances understanding and joint ownership of the problem. There is a likelihood of collaborating with AMYQ employees to find a solution and learn from the situation. The use of action learning research is aimed at learning, understanding

problems, solving problems, and developing new knowledge and understanding (Bradbury, 2010).

Participation was voluntary, and any staff member who wanted to opt out at any time during the project was free to do so. As the owner-manager of the organisation, I was able to identify some power and cultural issues that might affect the project and take action to mitigate their impact. Supervisors were made aware that they must not maltreat or sanction any staff who decided not to participate. The names and identities of the participants were kept confidential during the research and the thesis. All research documents were safeguarded in a fire-proof cabinet to which only I had access. Ethical approval was secured from the University before the commencement of data collection. With the guidance of my supervisor, I completed the Full Ethics Application Form, Participant Information Consent Form, and Ethics Response Form for this purpose. These forms were given to all the participating staff to be reviewed and signed. Samples of these forms are in Appendix A, B, and C, respectively. All participants understood that there was no compensation for participation, and their responses would be anonymous.

A desired future state of the organisation would be to use the research outcomes to improve my management decision-making and leadership skills in such a way that the company's liquidity would be enhanced. It was widely agreed by the participants that this would also lead to the payment of salaries and allowances, and better business opportunities for the organisation. I used the research results and outcomes solely to improve the organisation for the benefit of all stakeholders and participants.

3.18 Participant Observations and Document Reviews

Another source of data comprised my direct observations of the organisational system and observations of the research participants. The processes of the organisation were observed during the research as a means of identifying employees' behaviour and their attitude towards following instructions and policies. These include approvals of buying of goods, issuance of payment instructions, delivery of goods to customers, employee attendance, and employee welfare approval processes. Participant observations took place within the organisation during our regular meetings, informal gatherings, workshops, interviews, and telephone conversations.

3.19 Challenges of Action Learning Experienced During the Research

Although the action learning method that I used for this research has been shown to be effective, I experienced some challenges during the process. One of the challenges that I faced was in the set formation. Forming the set was challenging because this was my first direct experience of real-life action learning. Emotionally, I was disturbed that I was going to trust my business problems to my employees. In a way, this felt like losing control. However, I reminded myself that the importance of the project was bigger than my fears. The optimum number of members of an action learning set is five to eight (Pedlar, 2008; Revans, 2011; Walia and Marks-Maran, 2014). However, I utilised all willing participants (employees) in my one-set design to save time going from one set to another.

Another challenge that I faced was in navigating my multiple roles during the research. I served as the researcher, facilitator of the action learning set, and owner of the business. Managing these roles was challenging because of the different elements of them. I also had to come back home to manage my family. These actions called for multiple juggling skills so that the various aspects of my life would not fall apart. I had to manage these diverse roles with a dispassionate stand to avoid alienating any of them. They were equally important to me individually.

Another challenge that I faced was time management. Since my business was facing severe problems, there was a need to act quickly. Holding the action learning set meetings sometimes felt like using too much time. But the importance of action learning is in learning in action. I had to act following the set deliberations and suggestions and then evaluate these actions for effectiveness. Managing these times was challenging.

3.20 Summary of Research Plan

This research design started with a 360-degree rating of the organisational leadership. My leadership of the small firm was evaluated by my employees. I believed that there would be self-assessment bias if I rated and evaluated myself. Accordingly, an amended Crisis Leader Efficacy in Assessing and Deciding scale (C-LEAD) model was used by the employees in their rating of my crisis leadership efficacy and that of the team leads. In-depth interviews

with the participants were also conducted in phase 2. The third phase of the methodology was the formation of an action learning set of 10 employees. Another method of research data used was the observation of participants and document reviews. The results and findings are presented in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 4

Data Presentation and Analysis

4. Introduction

In this chapter, the data collected through the employees' 360-degree ratings of me will be presented and analysed. Also, useful data were collected through employee interviews and the action learning set interactions. In addition, participant observations and document analysis formed part of the data that is presented here. The research sought to find appropriate leadership actions that would enable AMYQ Ventures Limited's leadership to ameliorate the impact of the crisis and uncertainty being faced by the organisation. Since action learning involves acting and learning, some documentary sources were analysed to support the evidence generated from the analysed data.

4.1 Overview of Data and Analysis

The unfavourable business conditions being faced by AMYQ Ventures Limited included employee absenteeism, demotivation, lack of finance, mounting account receivables, increased bank debt, inconsistent government policy, and very poor sales revenue. This chapter will review the data from the three main sources described in the methodology section. The data from the 360-degree evaluation of the company leadership is presented in section 4.2. This section covers additional enquiries and involved the use of a questionnaire to evaluate the leadership competencies of the organisation's management, especially by me as the owner-manager. I was chosen for this 360-degree evaluation by all 14 employees due to my dominance in decision-making and running of the organisation: a situation that was confirmed during the interviews. The data from a total of 14 one-to-one interviews will be presented in section 4.3. These interviews were conducted with three senior officers and thereafter with 11 junior staff. The purpose of the interviews was to seek a better understanding of the challenges being faced by the organisation while comparing the company context with the key themes of the research. This allowed me to examine my owner-manager roles and responsibilities within the context of the key themes to improve my leadership during this crisis. The interviews further allowed for sub-themes to emerge from the main themes. These included non-payment of salaries, employee absenteeism, employee participation, family business, and owner-manager sub-themes.

The data from the learning set meetings are captured in section 4.3 and include insights concerning the observations of my leadership in a way that is beneficial to the organisation under review. The action learning set suggestions covered areas such as debt recovery, salary payment, and actions to reduce absenteeism within the organisation, and these are also discussed in this section. Data from observations and documents reviewed are also presented.

Additional sub-themes also emerged, including crisis leadership and crisis management. Change and stakeholder management are highlighted in section 4.4. This section also provides additional sub-themes of employee welfare, cooperation with competitors, and other actions for AMYQ Ventures Limited leadership to take.

The collaborative efforts of the employees in the learning set were influential in solving the crisis and uncertainty that is unsettling the business. It is important to note how the key themes from the literature review are prevalent in the research findings, leading to a better understanding of effective crisis leadership skills for a small firm such as AMYQ Ventures Limited.

To maintain the anonymity and confidentiality of respondents, it was necessary to use a coding system, as introduced in section 3.15, so that they could not be easily identified by a reasonable third party. Thus, the three senior staff were classified as FM1, FM2, and FM3. The junior staff members were classified as follows: A1, B1, C1, D1 (reporting to FM1); E2, F2, G2, H2 (reporting to FM2), and I3, J3, K3 (reporting to FM3). A1, E2, and I3 are members of my family. A summary of the data is presented at the end of the chapter.

4.2 Data and Analyses from the 360-Degree Rating of Organisational Leadership

The 360-degree rating of the organisational leadership was carried out to value/rate my crisis leadership skills and competencies. I had significant control of the business and took all the major decisions. I was therefore rated by the fourteen employees of the organisation to ascertain my competencies and ability to lead the organisation out of the crisis. Eight crisis leadership skills identified by Boin et al. (2005), Hwang and Cameron (2008), and

James and Wooten (2005) were evaluated in this study. The crisis leadership skills proposed include building trustful relations, identifying organisational gaps, taking responsibility, and acting wisely for the benefit of the organisation. Others include the ability to sense crisis, learn from crisis, set priorities, evaluate risk properly and maintain excellent communication. These skills are similar to the eight leadership competencies identified by McShane, Sharma, and von Gilnow (2013): extroversion, conscientiousness, positive self-evaluation, high self-esteem, and self-efficacy, internal locus of control, inner motivation to pursue goals, inquisitiveness and action-oriented, truthfulness and consistency in words and action.

While reflecting on designing the 360-degree questionnaire, the work of Hadley et al. (2011), which centred on the measurement of the efficacy of leadership during a crisis, became relevant due to the small number of staff in AMYQ Ventures Limited. Hadley et al. (2011) developed a scale to measure crisis leader efficacy – the C-LEAD scale – and its parameters were used to develop a questionnaire to be utilised for the 360-degree evaluation of AMYQ Ventures Limited’s leadership. The C-LEAD scale assesses the effectiveness of a leader’s capacity to get information and make decisions during a crisis. These were different competencies when compared to those of Wooten and James (2008) because the latter is designed mainly for crisis identification and aversion. Appendix 7 shows a sample of the questionnaire utilised. The focus of the adapted C-LEAD questions was to analyse leadership competencies during the crisis and the relationship that may exist between the leader and other employees, especially during tough times. Answer keys to the questions were limited to ‘True’, ‘Undecided’, or ‘False’ to keep the questionnaire as easy as possible for the research participants to complete. Questions were derived from the C-LEAD (Hadley et al., 2011) which centres on the leader’s communications and interpersonal skills, risk management capability, decision-making, prioritizing skills, and sense-making skills. A total of eleven (11) questions were used in the questionnaire. Nine of these questions were derived from Hadley et al.’s (2011) C-LEAD themes, while two captured the leadership quality of communication and risk-taking ability during the containment and damage control phase (James and Wooten, 2010).

Table 8: The 360-degree rating of the company’s management

QUESTIONS (Appendix 7)	TRUE (no. of staff)	UNDECIDED (no. of staff)	FALSE (no. of staff)
1. The leader can anticipate the political and interpersonal ramifications of his decisions and actions.	12	1	1
2. The leader can summarise the key issues involved in a situation to others regardless of how much data is available.	11	2	1
3. The leader can make decisions and recommendations, even when enough information is not provided.	11	2	1
4. The leader can assess how the members of the general public are affected by the organisational crisis being faced.	13	0	1
5. The leader can determine which information is critical to relay to other units in advance of them requesting it.	13	0	1
6. The leader can keep others abreast of compact work activities without over-informing or under-informing them.	12	1	1
7. The leader is able to make decisions and recommendations even under extreme time pressure and during the crisis.	13	0	1
8. The leader can estimate the potential deaths and injuries that may occur as the result of other employee actions and recommendations.	13	0	1
9. The owner-manager is responsible for the problems being faced by AMYQ Ventures Limited.	13	0	1
10. You have received adequate communication from management concerning the problems, and you consider this adequate.	12	0	2
11. The owner-manager can modify employees’ regular work activities instantly to respond to an urgent need and can adapt quickly to changing situations.	12	0	2

The anonymous evaluation by the employees yielded the above results: twelve of the employees believed that I was well equipped in terms of my skills to manage the crisis being faced by AMYQ Ventures Limited. They were of the view that I had communicated

appropriately with the employees while also making tough decisions and taking risks, especially during tough situations. However, two of the employees believed that I was high-handed and did not communicate effectively with employees on matters that concerned them. They indicated that some of the crisis issues were because of the decisions I had made, and that I seemed not to care about the welfare of the employees and their families.

Two of the employees also expressed their fears about how the organisation would solve the problems it was facing. One of the employees (K3) stated (during the interview) that he felt like resigning so that he could seek another organisation to work with, but wanted to collect his past salaries before making the decision. While reviewing his questionnaire sheet, it was noticed that all his answers were the same for all the questions (FALSE).

It is evident from the evaluation that some of the organisational problems were caused by my decisions as owner-manager, and this has caused some unease in my thinking about the research process. From the above, 13 employees believed that the crisis was because of my poor decisions. Indeed, the dialogic collaboration has brought out deep issues of concern that hitherto were not mentioned during our regular staff meetings. All the employees recalled that when the organisation went into the poultry feed supply business, proper planning and business analysis were not done. Due diligence before taking the decision could have revealed that the poultry feed producers were new in the market and had no substantial financial power to sustain the business. That company has since folded without supplying AMYQ N25m (about \$420,000.00) worth of goods. This contributed to our cash squeeze.

The second part of the 360-degree rating, involving the rating of the three senior staff (directors) by their own reports, did not take place. All the junior staff refused to rate their supervisors. They believed such a rating would not be useful to the organisation. They believed that I took all the decisions in the firm, while the senior staff were not allowed to do so. So, they all agreed that they would instead rate me.

4.2.1 Summary of Findings from the 360-Degree Evaluation of the Owner-Manager

The utilisation of the 360-degree evaluation technique to rate my performance and leadership qualities in the management of AMYQ Ventures Limited revealed that although I have satisfactory skills in terms of listening, presentation, honesty, and good ethics, some employees found my skills inadequate in areas such as communication and participative decision-making style, delegating authority, and creativity. This confirmed my earlier thinking that my leadership needed to be scrutinised for the benefit of the organisation. Indeed, staff morale was low and needed to be evaluated in order to take urgent remedial action. This further reaffirmed one of the research questions on the need to improve employee motivation.

The 360-degree rating revealed that I had clearly communicated the crisis to the employees, which could improve employee perceptions (James and Wooten, 2010). Twelve of the 14 employees agreed that there had been effective communication. I believe that the information shared with the research participants/employees has improved their feelings towards the crisis, perhaps because of the reassurances and mediating messages given (Scott, 2008). Crisis leaders are usually viewed as competent and credible in handling these situations when they convey rationality and understanding to stakeholders during a crisis (Elsbach, 2000).

Employee perceptions and ratings of my risk-taking and management ability were also positive. Risk-taking is one of the competencies that can be useful for the second stage of crisis management (containment/damage control). Unconventional thinking and the ability to change courses when needed during a crisis is a useful attribute for effective crisis containment (James and Wooten, 2010).

4.3 Data Presentation and Analyses from Interviews

In-depth interviews (structured and unstructured) and observation were the primary data collection methods used in this phase. In reporting the results of the interviews, it was necessary to present them in the manner in which they were carried out. The three senior staff members of AMYQ were interviewed separately and individually. Observations were also made during these interviews regarding unspoken body language. Other members of

staff were also interviewed separately. In the interviews, I utilised an interview guide (Appendix D) to avoid leading questions and the risk of influencing interviewees (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). I also asked open-ended questions, although the employees were allowed to stray outside these questions for better and deeper perspectives. The guide was developed with the themes of the literature synthesis in mind and the research questions that would enable me to get useful information concerning the appropriate leadership actions that AMYQ Ventures Limited management can take during the crisis and uncertainty.

Some of the questions were focused on the problems of absenteeism, increase in uncollected debts from customers, especially the Ministry of Agriculture, unpaid salary and allowances, and communication deficiencies in the organisation. Others covered the need for changes in the organisation, my role in the organisational problem being faced, and the competencies that I ought to have in order to mitigate and contain the damage the crisis had caused. For ease of categorisation and time management, I interviewed the senior and junior staff of the company separately. The interviews with the three senior staff and other employees were carried out in my office to allow for comfort and confidentiality. Each interview lasted between 20 and 55 minutes. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and later analysed manually for completeness and accuracy. Computer packages were not used for the analysis (although they have been said to be useful) due to time constraints and cost. In addition, AMYQ is a small firm of only 15 staff and this phase of the study involved me interviewing 11 junior and three senior employees.

The transcripts were later grouped into different topics that were related to the themes identified in the literature review and research questions. Codes were generated for the different themes using common parameters and relationships across the data (Gibson and Brown, 2011). A deductive approach was used for the data analysis, since I already had an idea of the different themes (Saunders et al., 2009), especially as these helped in the development of the interview guide. I was ready to reduce the bias of preconceptions and presumptions, and repeated the deductive analysis to ensure that new themes that might emerge were also considered (Gibbs, 2007).

In interpreting the interviews, the employees were allowed to reconfirm and update their initial perspectives to validate the quality of the interviews and the themes that emerged (Nielsen and Lyhne, 2016). These follow-up interviews led to a more dialogic collaboration between me and the employees. I gained a better understanding of the employees’ attitudes and feelings throughout the interviews. At some point, the interviews became more of an open and positive discussion. This justified Fontana and Fret’s (2008) position that interviews lead to a social encounter and participative relationship between the researcher and the participants.

The themes and sub-themes that emerged after the interviews were as follows:

Table 9: Themes and sub-themes

MANAGEMENT OF CRISIS AND UNCERTAINTY		
	MAIN THEMES	SUB-THEMES
1	LEADERSHIP	Small Business
		Crisis Leadership
		Leadership Competencies
		Family business and owner-manager
2	EMPLOYEE MOTIVATION	Absenteeism
		Salary payments
		Employee participation
		Trust
3	CHANGE AND RISK MANAGEMENT	Organisational Change
		HR Policy
		Communication

4.3.1 Results from Senior Staff Interviews on the Decision-Making Process:

This section highlights the interview responses from three senior staff of the organisation. All three senior staff agreed that the company is a small business but is being run like a family business where only the MD/CEO takes the major decisions within the firm. FM1 conveyed this as follows: “AMYQ is a small firm, but the owner of the business is promoting it like a family business and does not want sensitive matters to be handled by someone else”.

FM2 insisted that “We can be given some level of authority to sign and approve some expenses to make work move faster when you are not here. Sometimes you are not here and the work should continue”. The senior staff members felt that they were not empowered to take decisions within the company, and that this had hindered their creativity. Although one of them (FM3) did not think so, he mentioned that he had noticed the preferential treatment of staff from the same local government as me. According to FM3, “Our managing director does not recognise our inputs. He wants to recognise people from his village even when these people are not more experienced like me”.

The increased absenteeism and demotivation of the staff were blamed on the non-payment of salaries for over four years. The non-involvement of the senior staff during strategic decisions was also considered demotivational by the senior staff. All three senior staff gave the same feedback when asked about their likely participation during the change initiatives that may come out of this research. They agreed to be supportive of the project but expressed fears about the owner-manager being able to convince the junior staff to join the process.

The major result during the interview was echoed by the FM2 as follows:

The managing director of the company has been running the company as if it was a family business. The organisation hierarchy is non-existent, and all decisions rest on the CEO without regard to the input of the senior staff. Non-involvement of any senior officer is a major cause of our problem.

Another area of concern for the senior staff was the level of pay. The three senior staff observed that the staff salary was not competitive when compared to other small companies. They all stated that they would like their salaries to be increased and their outstanding salaries settled. They have not received a pay raise since they joined the company in 2000. FM1 complained thus:

How come Chirozik Limited and AIK Limited are paying their staff higher than AMYQ? An officer with a similar experience in these firms earns 25% higher than us

and we are not happy about this. We believe that AMYQ is bigger than them and even has more distribution centres.

FM3 supported this view as follows: “Please sir, you must look at our pay. Things are difficult and prices of things in the market have gone up over the years, and yet our salaries have remained stagnant”.

FM2 also supported the other senior officers as follows: “Efforts to get the managing director to increase our pay were not approved. Our counterparts in other companies of similar structure and size were being paid higher”.

All three senior staff also spoke about the need for open communication within the organisation to promote unity and understanding during this period. Their answers suggested that I should have an open discussion and communicate with all employees while explaining the difficult times the company is facing. FM2 made this comment in the interview and asked further questions:

There is a need for honesty and truthfulness from the business owner. He must tell us why we are low on products. For example, what is the situation with our supplier, TAK Agro Chemical? We have not received fertiliser supply for over four months.

All the senior officers identified the lack of funds as the primary cause of AMYQ Ventures Limited’s problems, since some good investment proposals were not approved by management due to a lack of finance to execute such business ideas. In terms of their readiness for change, they expressed a desire to participate actively in solving the organisation’s problems.

The interviews with the senior officers therefore delivered some findings related to these themes: decision-making (empowerment is lacking), family business, financing problems, poor salary structure, and communication issues.

4.3.2 Results from the Interviews with Junior Staff

Eleven employees who made up the junior staff of the company were also interviewed, and they commended the new approach taken by management. All the employees felt appreciated as regards the way I approached them and openly related to them concerning the company crises. For example, D1 was particular in his response, saying: "We are encouraged by the behaviour of the owner-manager in openly discussing the company situation with us and even acknowledging that every staff is very important and will be instrumental in managing the crisis and uncertainty". In addition, H2 said: "I am very happy that you are having this time to interview me. I now know that I am valued here and will be honest in my answers".

In the interviews, it was apparent that the staff were interested in getting the company back on track. Since salary and wages are also considered motivational factors (Wasiu and Adebajo, 2014), all the employees agreed that non-payment of their salaries have contributed towards their non-participation in company activities. For instance, J3 said: "Please, we want to receive our over-due salaries, as this will help us feed and take care of our families and transport us to work daily".

To further buttress the need to receive salaries, G2 also insisted: "Sir, we need to be paid, we don't care whether the company exists or not. We have worked and have earned the money. So, salaries must be paid to encourage us to keep coming to the office".

They blamed me, as the owner-manager/managing director, for the company's problems. All the employees also stated that their absence from work was because of the company's inability to pay their outstanding salaries. They argued that their dependents had been affected by this non-payment. Ten of the junior staff stated that they had not been able to pay their children's school fees for the past year.

All the employees interviewed agreed that my communication had not been truthful and three of the eleven expressed doubts about whether I could lead them out of the crisis. Additional findings from the interview included the importance of open communication

with the research participants and the willingness of the company leadership to engage with them for a better understanding of the company's situation.

All the junior staff agreed to support the management in making changes that would be beneficial to all stakeholders. In addition to the above results, ten of the junior staff responded to my enquiry concerning their readiness for any changes that I made towards reaching a solution to the organisation's problems, especially as it concerned the employees. For example, J3 emphasised: "Once we get some money as part of our salaries, we will be ready to help in any way to improve the organisation and help the researcher in the process".

Moreover, F2 was courageous enough to say:

I need money to pay my child's school fees. This is one of the things my salary helps me to do for my family. I don't have any other income source. I am ready to make suggestions that will move the organisation forward so that my salary will be paid consistently.

The respondents all agreed that any change would be supported, provided that it led to an immediate positive impact on their situation. These responses seem to suggest that they were overly concerned with their salary arrears, as this would motivate them to support any future organisational changes (Wasiu and Adebajo, 2014). One of the junior staff (C1) stated his apathy towards any envisaged change, since he had made up his mind to leave the organisation as soon his salary was paid:

The company is in bad shape because of the inexperience of the owner-manager. He keeps taking decisions that are not well-tested. I don't want to work here anymore. I need my money so that I can look for another job.

According to Shah and Ghulam (2010), workplace variables such as salaries, job satisfaction, employee networks, and dependence on pay could affect employees' attachment to the organisation. Employees will exhibit negative attitudes and behaviour when appropriate

workplace variables are missing. Loss of staff is risky and may lead to more significant operational uncertainty (Herbane, 2010). However, in my opinion, most of the employees are ready for change, since they have a shared psychological state of mind and are committed to accepting and supporting change initiatives for their benefit and the benefit of AMYQ Ventures Limited (Weiner, 2009).

4.3.3 Summary of Findings from Interviews

The first findings from the interviews were that the employees of AMYQ Ventures Limited were unhappy and anxious in the face of the company crisis. Anxiety and fear may creep into the minds of stakeholders during a crisis (Coombs and Holladay, 2014; Jin and Pang, 2010), and in my opinion, these issues have affected staff morale. It was evident during the interviews that both the senior and junior staff were indeed worried about the state of the company finances and ways the company could pay their salaries and remain in business.

The non-payment of salaries was a major cause of staff demotivation and absenteeism in AMYQ Ventures Limited. The responses of the staff confirmed this to me. In my opinion, pay is a general motivator, although in some cases, such as that of the senior staff, empowerment to make more significant decisions would add more to their job. Rynes et al. (2004) supported this view, saying that employees react more effectively to monetary rewards than any other motivational human resources incentive. So, the comparison of the pay structures of the senior staff with that of other firms is an indication that AMYQ Ventures Limited's pay structure may need some review in the future.

The lack of decision-making authority among senior staff, especially in matters concerning investment and approval of expenses, had given them the impression that I did not trust them. Trust is an important attribute that binds leaders and their followers with the view toward gaining organisational and leadership success (Mineo, 2014). Therefore, the company's position may be improved through fairness, respect for all staff, and organisational credibility. These attributes are foundations of trust in any organisation (Burchell and Robin, 2011). By empowering the senior staff, trust issues dissipate, and employees give more for the benefit of the organisation (Mineo, 2014).

Readiness for change initiatives that will emanate from this research is crucial. Proper communication from me as the owner-manager has reduced this apathy, as this has touched their emotions. They have committed to a collaborative effort to solve the organisational crisis. The company's readiness for change is a critical precursor to the successful change initiative that the leadership is focusing on (Chonko et al., 2002; Eby et al., 2000; Weiner, 2009). In this case, there is a need to pay attention to the company's culture concerning innovation, risk-taking, and learning (Jones, Jimmieson, and Griffiths, 2005; Ingersoll et al., 2000) as these are crucial during management change initiatives. Risk-taking is one of the appropriate competencies of crisis leadership during the containment stage (James and Wooten, 2010). I believe that the company leadership must be willing to take calculated risks that will improve the welfare of the employees and the survival and growth of the company.

4.3.4 Suggestions from the Interviews: Change and Stakeholder Management

The interview process was intended to help in enacting change and managing the employees to achieve full participation and buy-in towards the research outcomes. It also captured the suggestions that had an impact on employees' absenteeism, debt recovery, employee motivation, and formation of alliances with the competition. The interviews with employees focused on getting to know their understanding of the organisational change imperative and on soliciting their buy-in. They were also asked to make suggestions for the business, with the promise that these suggestions would be considered and treated with respect. The focus was to find out the specific actions and changes that employees wanted to see within the company. They were also asked about their readiness for these changes.

In line with the outcomes of the interviews, my questions and the employees' answers during these interactions were focused on ways in which employee absenteeism could be reduced and the need for improved recovery of debts from the company debtors. Another area that was covered here involved finding ways to improve sales, especially during the Government program, whereby farmers are given subsidised agricultural inputs by agro-dealers.

Feedback from stakeholders can improve the learning and growth of an organisation (Cennamo, Berrone, and Gomez-Mejia, 2009; Harrison et al., 2010). The interview process

allowed for open conversations and meetings between me and the research participants. Employees voluntarily gave suggestions even when they were not in the office. These suggestions from stakeholders revealed some areas of inefficiency in our organisational processes.

The dialogic and collaborative activities I undertook with the participants led to the understanding of the need for management intervention on issues relating to employee welfare, motivation, absenteeism, and debt recovery. These are areas that the research participants suggested for improvements.

4.4 Data Presentation from Learning Set Interactions and Meetings

The action learning set was made up of 10 employees, since the other four declined to participate. It unravelled some leadership actions that were necessary during the crisis. The participants scrutinised previous decisions by management, especially concerning certain investments made with company. It was acknowledged that the leadership of the organisation had failed to take due diligence before investing in a failed poultry feed distribution business. This investment led to the reduced liquidity of the company and continued non-payment of salaries to employees. The liquidity position of the company is currently low, but the research aims to improve the recovery of monies owed and negotiation of the bank debt in a way that will allow the company to pay employee salaries and improve staff morale.

The major suggestions from the action learning set are as follows:

1. Identify and sanction employees for absenteeism.
2. Use debt collectors to recover AMYQ debts.
3. Partner with other companies to improve sales.

During one of the set meetings, on hearing participants' concerns about improving the company's revenue base, I told the set that I have an accounting and tax background. I am a chartered accountant. I told them that I might be able to use my accounting and tax skills to recover withheld tax credit notes for clients. I wanted to hear from them whether they thought I could set up a unit that would drive this revenue path, since it would not be costly

to initiate. The set members welcomed the idea and asked me what it would take from the company. I told them that it would only require my writing the proposal letters and submitting them to the various organisations we can market. They immediately told me to start this as a tax consultancy unit, since we would not be spending money. For instance, K3 said: "With all due respect sir, you must use all your certificates and experience in the bank to rescue AMYQ. Any new source of revenue will help us, sir". F2 agreed, saying: "The MD should go ahead and start the withholding tax credit collection immediately. But we don't want to waste money if this will not be profitable".

This new unit has generated some cash flow for the organisation by thinking broadly and unconventionally (Eagly and Carli, 2007). Sharing information with an action learning set leads to learning, which could lead to a positive outcome for the business (Staw, Sandelands, and Dutton, 1981).

4.4.1 Absenteeism

Employees were asked how often they stayed away from work. Ten out of 14 employees revealed that they had often decided not to come to the office without permission. One of them (A1) said: "It is discouraging to come to work not knowing whether you will be paid for work done at the end of the month. I cannot come to work every day, please". Another one (F2), responded: "The company does not obey my employment letter, and this means I can leave work anytime and can visit my doctor for a day or two in a week".

K3 suggested thus: "Let us take responsibility here. In America and the UK, people are paid hourly. The company can deduct hourly pay from our salary for any number of days we did not show up to work or come late. This will correct our attitude".

Supporting K3, F2 mentioned that he would not mind this stand as long as it was transparent. He therefore suggested: "Let us have a register and start signing in whenever we come into the office. This can help us track our attendance daily". All the staff supported these views.

The above are representative of the responses received. AMYQ Ventures Limited's absenteeism records show that some employees were in the habit of staying away from work. Extended employee absence can be costly for the employer. Nelson and Quick (2008) posited that dissatisfied workers will be absent for more time than satisfied workers. The research employees agreed that reduced productivity was caused by low employee morale and suggested that the research outcomes should also involve working towards improving employee morale and productivity. Absenteeism has a more negative impact on small businesses than on bigger ones. This may be due to the lower pool of workers in the employ of small firms than big firms. In AMYQ Ventures Limited, staff absenteeism is very noticeable, since only 15 people are working for the firm. The primary reason for being absent from work has been ill-health. The company has no health insurance or clinic retainers for its staff and has always found it difficult to monitor this issue.

Absenteeism is an indicator that the organisational climate is not motivating enough for the culprits, and this is a sociological issue connected to unsatisfactory and demotivating work conditions (Cucchiella, Gastaldi, and Ranieri, 2014). In the end, the company is made to pay for non-performing staff, thus reducing organisational performance and productivity and increasing staff costs. This leads to organisational inefficiency (Del Boca and Parisi, 2010), and without a comprehensive HR Policy to address this issue, AMYQ Ventures Limited will continue to face the problem. It was suggested by the set that penalties and pay deductions could be used to tackle this while also encouraging staff to be punctual and more present during work hours.

4.4.2 Debt Recovery

Another area that the staff identified as being in need of immediate action was debt collection, as they believed that this was a good strategy that could improve company cash flow and the payment of their salaries. Small companies are more exposed to payment defaults, and this can lead to their collapse (Murray, 1994; Swallow, 2009). The result of the interviews suggested that the company's debts need to be recovered. All the staff, both senior and junior, expressed their desire that all the debts owed to AMYQ by various organisations, especially the ones owed by the federal government, should be pursued and recovered. The company debt portfolio is now more than N25m (twenty-five million naira),

and all the employees wanted the company to recover this debt, or part of it. The in-house recovery efforts have yielded no results as yet, although all employees suggested the use of debt recovery professionals, to be paid according to the recoveries made.

Small firms such as AMYQ Ventures Limited are generally undercapitalised and dependent on owner financing, making them vulnerable to fluctuations in working capital (Padachi, 2006). The company's receivable is high and has led to poor cash flow for the business. Payment of salaries and the day-to-day running of the business has been difficult. Reducing the number of days these account receivables remain uncollected will improve the firm's profitability and working capital management (Deloof, 2003; Fazzari and Peterson, 1993; Uyar, 2009). Financially constrained small firms typically find it difficult to raise external financing and have a lower optimal level of working capital (Fazzari and Peterson, 1993).

The use of debt recovery professionals is also seen as cost-effective since monies would not be paid out to them until a recovery is made. This ensures that AMYQ will have a better cash flow than previous recovery efforts, where fees were paid in advance before the recovery of debts was made. A 10% recovery fee was suggested, but this would be based on the recovered amount.

4.4.3 Cooperation and Alliance with Competitors

Suggestions from the employees also covered ways in which the organisation could form alliances with existing agro-dealers, as they believed this would improve sales. The interview responses received from senior and junior members of staff included forming partnerships with some other firms operating in the same agric-input sector. In light of suggestions from employees and the critical literature review, AMYQ Ventures Limited's business could be enhanced by meeting and cooperating with other agro-dealers in the same business (Zhang and Frazier, 2011; Lechner, Soppe, and Dowling, 2016). These are competitors to AMYQ Ventures Limited, but their cooperation with AMYQ has become a good idea and has led to significant improvements in sales of the company products. Peng et al. (2012) confirmed that when organisations cooperate with their competitors, a win-win situation can develop for both parties.

Lin (2002) and Beekman and Robinson (2004) agreed that the development of young and small firms could be enhanced by vertical cooperation. This interfirm relationship can boost sales and is a form of social capital (Lin, 2002; Payne et al., 2011) while ensuring that participating firms gain access to necessary resources (Ahuja, 2000; Zacharia, Nix, and Lusch 2009). In this case, AMYQ Ventures Limited gains access to more farmers and distribution centres, while the other firms gain access to supply of agro-inputs such as fertiliser, which they sell, sharing the commission with AMYQ.

The inter-firm relationship has been yielding positive outcomes for AMYQ Ventures Limited. The business partnership between AMYQ and Chirozik (another agro-dealer) has yielded significant positive results. Chirozik gets its fertiliser supplies from AMYQ, while AMYQ gets a commission from the sales made to farmers that are outside the zone/centres approved for AMYQ.

4.4.4 Summary of Findings from Action Learning Set

A major concern for the action learning set members was lack of payment of salaries. Staff absenteeism also featured prominently. Activities that will improve their morale, increase their participation, and reduce absenteeism will increase their level of participation and readiness for the change project. Absenteeism was high during this period of crisis and uncertainty. Penalties and pay deductions were suggested by the learning set as some of the methods the management might use to curtail this problem and increase employee participation and attendance.

Debt recovery was also a significant issue during this stage of the research. Participants also suggested that management should pay more attention to the recovery of debts being owed by the government and other parties. The use of debt recovery agents and lawyers who would be paid based on the recovery they made was also suggested and agreed. We all agreed that the professional fee of 10% of the amount recovered would be paid to the recovery agents. This performance-based pay was debated and agreed by all staff.

Finally, participants also suggested that AMYQ should form alliances with other small firms to increase access to more farmers. These alliances with other agro-dealers were a way of improving sales of fertiliser and sharing profit with competition for the areas in which

AMYQ does not have a foothold. Supplying these fertiliser inputs and selling them in these other centres would be a win-win situation and would improve AMYQ Ventures Limited’s cash flow. The impact of these suggestions and actions will be significant in the near future.

4.5 Participant Observation and Document and Archival Records Review

This section presents the documents and records collected and utilised during the research process. The documents utilised in this research included the following: letters, emails, minutes of meetings, AMYQ Ventures Limited documents, internal memos, diaries, and extracts from the company’s financial statements. According to Yin (2009), these are documents that relate directly or indirectly to the business activities of the organisation and the various communications between the relevant stakeholders of the firm. Records are historical and included profiles of the employees, bank records, supplier records, and engagement letters. Archival records include computer files and records, personal records of employees, and business documents. These documents and records were confidentially handled and appropriately secured in a fireproof cabinet in the office, to which only I have the combination and access. The identity of the sources of these documents was also kept a secret to protect the identity of the participants.

The first observation was some employee body language during work hours and meetings. I observed that five of the 14 employees had a poor attitude to work. This is almost 36% of the workforce. They were usually late to work and, on some days, did not come to work at all. They never called the office to take permission or seek approval for coming late to work. The absenteeism issue featured prominently in my research question.

A review of the company's financial statements showed that the company made a loss in 2018. In the first five months of 2019, it was still making losses. Turnover for the years declined from 21m Naira to 4.9m Naira in 2018. Account receivables were high, reaching 25m Naira in 2018.

Table 4.5 AMYQ Management Account 2010 to 2018

AMYQ Ventures Limited Management Accounts for 2010 to 2018 - Amounts in '000 Naira									
Description	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018

Turnover	15,300	15,606	16,230	17,204	21,953	15,250	14,500	10,900	4,900
Cost of Sales	4,110	4,192	4,359	4,621	8,120	7,150	6,850	5,640	3,500
Gross Profit	11,190	11,414	11,871	12,583	13,833	8,100	7,650	5,260	1,400
Distribution, Marketing, Admin and Other expenses	3,500	3,700	3,250	3,120	11,150	6,901	6,550	4,050	4,500
Net Profit	7,690	7,714	8,621	9,463	2,683	1,199	1,100	1,210	(3,100)

AMYQ Ventures Limited Management Account for 2010 to 2018 (ACCOUNTS RECEIVABLE) - Amounts in '000 Naira									
Description	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Accounts Receivable	3,080	2,470	2,100	2,550	25,900	26,000	25,750	24,000	25,150

4.5.1 Summary of Findings from Observations and Document Reviews

The main data gathered through observation included the high rate of absenteeism of workers and poor morale. The body language of the staff showed that they had little enthusiasm towards working for the company. Also, a review of the company's financial data showed declining turnover and increasing debtor balances by way of account receivables. Despite these, I still believed that the company might survive with the employee support and understanding.

4.6 Summary of Data Presentation and Analysis:

First, I employed a 360-degree evaluation technique to rate the performance and leadership qualities of AMYQ Ventures Limited's management, as typified by me as the owner-manager. The rating revealed that the organisational leadership has adequate skills in managing the crisis. AMYQ management has effectively communicated the crisis to employees, although a few employees feel otherwise. Competent and credible leaders can

manage a crisis effectively by conveying rationality and understanding to different stakeholders during the crisis (Elsbach, 2000). My risk-taking ability was rated very high: this is a useful competence in managing a crisis, especially during the containment/damage control phase, which is the phase in which AMYQ Ventures Limited was located at the time of the data collection.

Secondly, some interesting findings emerged during the interviews. This phase captured the employees' views and responses to different interview questions which were based on the key themes identified in the literature review and the research questions. The employees were found to be unhappy and anxious in the face of the company's crisis. Salaries were owed to the AMYQ staff, and this had affected their performance and led to a high rate of absenteeism. Monetary rewards are primary motivators that could spur staff performance. Empowerment of the senior staff was also found to be lacking, and the respondents suggested that the management could enrich their jobs by giving them some decision-making authority, which they believed would improve their creativity for the benefit of the organisation. They also suggested that building trust within the organisation could be enhanced through the empowerment of the senior staff. It was also observed that proper communication of the crisis by the organisational leadership had taken place, and this had improved the awareness of the crisis and the organisational readiness to change. In addition to this, the management must take calculated risks for the survival and growth of the company.

The action learning set was focused on employee involvement, participation, and change management. Participants asked the management to focus on quick resolution concerning payment of their salaries, solving absenteeism problems, debt recovery strategies and the need to improve sales of the company's products during the GESS of the Federal Government of Nigeria. In addition, organisational leadership could improve employees' morale by sharing information about the crisis and giving them a sense of belonging in the organisation. Respondents also suggested that employee welfare could be enhanced by implementing a pension scheme and a health insurance scheme for the employees. Training and empowerment were also seen as means of improving the motivation of the staff. Absenteeism was noticed to be high, and the staff acknowledged that the firm could use an

HR policy of penalties and salary/pay deductions to bring down the rate of absenteeism. An increase in the recovery of funds from debtors of the organisation would allow for the payment of staff salaries and allowances, and this would boost staff morale and reduce absenteeism and its effect on the company's bottom line. Forming alliances with competition was also suggested as a way of improving the company's sales.

Participant observation and document reviews increased my need to manage change and stakeholder involvement. The aim was to decipher what the employees thought the organisation should do quickly for an immediate positive impact of the leadership actions. I learnt the importance of employee involvement/suggestions in the change project and ways in which these actions can reduce resistance to change. The focus of the observations and in fact the methodology design included what actions the management can start to take to reduce the effect of the crisis. Managing the employees so that they become part of the change process is critical to the success of this research. It was important, therefore, to acknowledge that the employees were useful. It was also revealed that employee welfare and motivation was crucial in the change project. All the staff believed that they should be more empowered to take decisions, as this could improve their creativity for the benefit of the company. They also suggested that the pension and health insurance scheme should be part of their welfare package. In addition, they suggested that training and self-development were inadequate and must be improved for the interest of the organisation.

Chapter 5

Actions Taken, Impact, and Discussion

5. Introduction

In this chapter, I will discuss the main actions taken during the study, their impact, and their relationship with the academic literature. The discussion aims to produce recommendations for improvements to leadership performance during periods of crisis and uncertainty within a small business. The major themes highlighted in Chapter 4 were identified as pointers towards designing and implementing the appropriate leadership actions for the benefit of the small business. These areas are further discussed in comparison with the academic literature to develop actionable knowledge and recommendations for the business. For ease of referencing and better understanding, this chapter is made up of discussions that are presented in the form of actions and outcomes for key stakeholders of the research. These stakeholders include the employees, the organisation, AMYQ Ventures Limited leadership, and me as the researcher. It is essential to discuss the above headings, as they affect leadership, employee motivation, and organisational change issues. In addition, the discussions are significant for answering the research questions identified in this action learning project. The main research questions are:

1. What actions are necessary to manage the employees for better motivation?
2. What actions should be taken to reduce employee absenteeism?
3. What actions are needed to increase the revenue and profitability of the business?

This chapter presents the significant findings and the organisational interventions implemented during the research and the impact they had on AMYQ as a small business.

5.1 Encouragement of Employee Participation

One of the research questions sought to understand how the leadership could encourage and improve the participation of employees during the crisis. The following management actions have been useful in achieving this objective.

5.1.1 Actions Taken and Impact: Improving Welfare and Salary Payments

I approved (as agreed by majority of the staff) the part payment (30%) of all the staff salaries owed, with a promise that the remaining balance of 70% would be paid in six months' time. I also agreed and started a small health insurance scheme for the staff. The results of the interviews with the senior and junior employees of AMYQ Ventures Limited in Sections 4.1.1 and 4.2.1 revealed that the employees wanted a review of their welfare package and payment of their long-outstanding salaries. For firms to attain their desired goals and objectives, employee welfare must be taken seriously (Dessler, 2008). Highly performing employees are needed to aid organisations in achieving their competitive advantage. According to Hamilton (2012), the provision of adequate welfare facilities improves employees' motivation and performance. The various interviews revealed that employees of the company wanted an immediate review of their welfare and payment of their salaries. I believe that these interventions have been accepted by the employees and improved their participation and performance in the organisation. AMYQ has enrolled the employees in a subsidised medical scheme, and this has been welcomed by all staff. The HMO Insurance Scheme allows the employees and their immediate families to use the services of selected hospitals for improved healthcare. This finding is supported by Armstrong (2006) and Stratton (2005), who argued that essential medical services bring good health and happiness to employees and reduce absenteeism caused by ill-health. Owusu-Acheaw (2010) supported this by stating that motivated employees support the organisational objectives, especially during hard times. This finding has no discrimination and pertains to both junior and senior staff.

Salary arrears have not been completely paid, but employees have picked this as an essential area that needs attention. Again, both senior and junior staff of AMYQ Ventures Limited stated that the company ought to settle their salary arrears to improve their well-being. Salary, in this case, is seen as a motivation factor (Wasiu and Adebajo, 2014). However, Nayak and Patra (2013) and Arifin (2012) posited that other factors such as job satisfaction and career development opportunities can also motivate and improve the performance of employees for the benefit of the organisation. This suggests that other factors also affect employee performance and may include managerial factors, employees' health, the nature of the job, employees' motivation, and the interpersonal communication that takes place during the organisational processes (Yamoah, 2013). The findings strongly supported the

use of monetary and financial incentives to improve employees' performance. According to Hoerr (2000) and Yamoah (2013), adequate financial benefits and compensation lead to better employee behaviour for the benefit of the organisation. In my opinion, salary payments must be made when due during a crisis, since a well-motivated workforce will improve performance, inter-unit collaboration and employees' willingness to take on extra duties. It was not the money *per se* but the underlying motives for which the employees wanted this money, especially given that in Nigeria, people are not only interested in their well-being, but also feel the need to show off, take care of immediate and extended family members, and achieve improved healthcare and social connections (Srivastava, Locke and Bartol, 2001). The result of the action taken (salary arrears paid in part) was in line with the argument in the literature that payment of salaries leads to improved performance of employees.

5.2. Action Taken to Mitigate the Effects of Crises

5.2.1 Attendance Register and Proportional Salary Deduction for Absentees

Another research question was concerned about promoting certain values that would reduce the impact of the crisis within the organisation. The reduction of absenteeism within the firm was a critical action that could yield positive results for the benefit of the company.

In Section 4.5.3 of the presentation of results, it was noted that many staff were deliberately absent from work. AMYQ Ventures Limited employees themselves observed a significant number of absent staff in the organisation during the period before the project, as did I. Although they claimed that their reasons were related to ill health, further probing revealed that absent employees were dissatisfied with the business and non-payment of their salaries. One of the objectives of this research was to reduce absenteeism to an appropriate level within the organisation, and in so doing, to improve employee participation and contribution to the growth of the firm. The form of absenteeism noticed here involved mainly absences without leave and habitual lack of punctuality in the office. Del Boca and Parisi (2010) posited that absenteeism may be caused by a lack of motivation and the culture prevalent within the organisation. Further discussions and observations revealed that employees did not feel obliged to keep to the terms of their employment, since management had not paid their outstanding salaries. In addition, there was no clear-cut organisational

policy that would deal with these human resource challenges. Some staff also suggested that they were underpaid, and this could be a consideration for being absent from work without approval. Dionne and Dostie (2007) found that poor salary structure and poor working conditions could lead to absenteeism. Mullins (2005) also supported this by suggesting that poor working conditions will lead to increased absenteeism of workers. It is my view that the actions of the employees were connected to the continued non-payment of their salaries over the years. This has created apathy and distrust in their minds.

The actions taken to reduce this problem were two-fold. The first was suggested by most of the employees themselves. They asked that the organisational leadership should impose punitive measures for those who do not respect the work hours established by the company. Deduction of salaries for the affected days has since been implemented and has been aiding management to encourage staff attendance. In addition, salary payment for the arrears owed has also started, and this has caused a shift in the attitude of most of the staff. Another action that has reduced absenteeism is the introduction of a staff attendance register whereby employees clock in and clock out daily. This attendance register has become a check for those who would like to play smart. It has also led to better supervision of employees and a reduction of absenteeism within the organisation.

5.2.2 Building Trust by Giving Senior Staff Expense Approval Limits

Trust issues were prevalent in the organisation, as noted in Section 4.2.5. The research has shown that the leadership of AMYQ Ventures Limited must create an enabling environment that addresses these issues. These actions must encourage trust and confidence in me by the employees and other stakeholders. My previous discussion about empowerment in Section 5.3.2 is also relevant here, as supported by Burchell and Robin (2011). Empowered senior staff believe that the owner-manager trusts them to work for the benefit of the company, and this will lead to leadership success during hard times (Mineo, 2014). By involving the employees in the day-to-day running of the business, and especially in some decisions being taken, trust in the leader is enhanced, and this translates directly into better performance (Colquitt, Scott, and LePine, 2007; MacKenzie, Podsakoff and Rich, 2001). In my opinion, my actions served as the antecedent of trust due to my participative leadership style (Huang

et al., 2009). My willingness to adopt some of the suggestions made by the employees, such as the need for better training and partnerships with some competitors, has improved followers' trust in my leadership. I believe that this has led to increased willingness of the followers to support the change efforts of the organisation. While the research was still ongoing and action was being taken, it was observed that employee absenteeism had been reduced. In my opinion, this was a reciprocal gesture of the employees and showed that they were happy with efforts I was making during the crisis (Brower, Schoorman, and Tan, 2000). It was therefore not surprising that the erstwhile unhappy employees have now offered their support to bring the company out of crisis. Higher levels of trust have also occurred due to the rewards being received from the organisation. By paying part of the outstanding salaries, I have demonstrated that I am fair and reliable. This action has imbued me with a sense of dependability and reliability, thus improving the employees' trust in my leadership (MacKenzie et al., 2001; Moorman and Grover, 2009; Podsakoff et al., 2006). The integrity of the leadership has sent positive signals to the employees, and this has improved their trust in the organisation's change and crisis management initiatives. I believe that I have built a healthy organisational culture of trust, and this is essential to the firm's survival (James, Wooten and Dushek, 2011).

5.3 Leadership actions that will positively affect AMYQ

Another important research question was to ascertain the actions that I could use to quickly improve the employees' motivation during this crisis. Presented below are quick actions that have been useful.

5.3.1 Promotion of Employee Participation

Employee participation was a sub-theme of employee motivation, as noted in Table 4. The action-learning approach used for this project has improved employee participation due to its collaborative process between me and the employees. It has led to enhanced interaction and understanding between the employees and me while the action was taken during the research and its impact on the crisis was evaluated. These actions were in line with Bargal's (2008) suggestions and have led to the use of interventions for the benefit of the employees and the firm. First, the employees freely provided their informed consent to participate in

the research. This enabled me to proceed and interact with them in a manner consistent with the action learning methodology. Interviews and observations were utilised during the research. Employees gave their insights and perspectives on the research. Some believed that I had contributed to the crisis being faced, while others believed that the government's non-payment had also played a massive role. Another impact of employees' participation was their involvement in the appraisal of me as the organisation's owner-manager during the 360-degree evaluation, which led to insights about appropriate actions necessary for the crisis stage being experienced. Their direct participation led to suggestions that were shaped by their experiences on the job (Azzellini, 2011; Breu and Hemingway, 2005). Their suggestions for sanctions for absentee employees showed their desire to make changes and see their work as being for the benefit of the organisation. They showed a shared sense of purpose, together with an improved desire to learn and work jointly to improve the organisation (Wenger and Snyder, 2000). Their participation also led to improved recovery of debts and reduction of the firm's accounts receivable (Section 4.5.4). In addition to the above, they also showed great willingness and support towards participating in the organisational change, such as in the appointment of a new director of administration and human resources. Staff participation was improved when employees felt secure and trusted the system in which they were working.

The employee actions may be because of three factors. First, the commitment of top management to the research presented an opportunity for elaborate communication, which impacted positively the way employees supported and participated. Effective communication of the change process encourages employee participation (Jaros, 2010; Neves and Caetano, 2009) through changes in their behaviour (Choi, 2011). Furthermore, supportive employee behaviour must have been caused by enhanced trust between the employees and me. Trust is critical in organisational change initiatives (Wohlgemuth, 2019) and reduces uncertainty within the organisation (Valenzuela and Contreras, 2014; Woolthuis, Hillebrand, and Nooteboom, 2005). In so doing, the commitment of the employees was improved and enhanced (Choi, 2011), leading to desirable work-related results within the small business. In my opinion, supportive behaviour from employees was vital for effective organisational change to take place.

5.3.2 Improving Communication

Due to the actions taken so far, the nature of the action learning project has improved communication within AMYQ Ventures Limited. This research, which was a collaboration between me and other members of the organisation, has ensured better communication and relationships within the organisation. The interviews with both the junior and senior staff highlighted in Sections 4.3.1 and 4.3.2 provided a platform for dialogue and open conversation between the stakeholders.

There was improved communication between the staff and me as to the nature of the crisis and uncertainty, and the impact it has had on the company's ability to pay salaries, make a profit, improve sales, and continue in business. An improved understanding of the problem by the employees enhanced their willingness to make behavioural changes such as reduced absenteeism for the benefit of the business. In addition, this was evident in their willingness to participate in the change process and the reduction of their resistance to change. Improved readiness for the change process was because of improved communication of the problem situation (Elving, 2005) to the stakeholders within the system.

Improved change communication addressed the employees' concerns, such as non-payment of salaries and non-collection of monies from debtors of the firm. This provided a humane touch to the crisis research and improved employee commitment (Balogun and Hope, 2003; Kitchen and Daly, 2002; Kotter, 1995) to finding a solution.

Our meetings during this action learning set enabled me to see improvements in the quality of interactions and discussions from the employees, who began to show more interest in the firm. The research showed that AMYQ Ventures Limited now has an improved community within the organisation, as all employees have been informed about their responsibilities and the organisational policies (De Ridder, 2003; Postmes et al., 2001). This has also helped in overcoming the barriers to change. Another area that has improved is the implementation of weekly meetings within the organisation. These meetings take place every Monday from 8am to 9am and afford us time to evaluate the impact of the actions taken in the previous week and take appropriate actions in the current week. The discussions within the team

have been very open and geared towards the improvement of the business and employee performance.

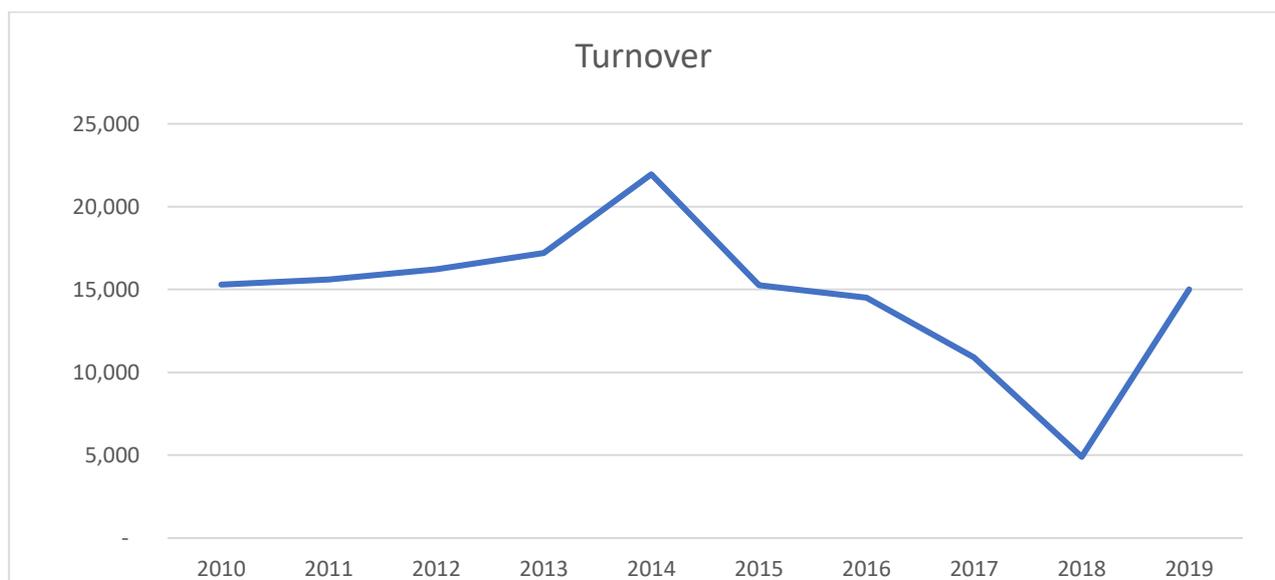
5.3.3 Alliance with Competition

AMYQ Ventures Limited has also formed alliances with some competing agro-dealers like Chirozik Limited and AIK Investment Limited. This was an outcome of the interviews and suggestions of the employees, especially in the action learning set meetings (Section 4.2). I want to acknowledge that this suggestion initially did not resonate well with me, until I searched and confirmed from the literature that such alliances could be possible and could enhance business growth. The collaboration with these firms involves sharing commissions on sales of agro-products in their locations/centres, which ordinarily would be exclusively theirs. Chiou and White (2005), Gleason, Mathur and Wiggins (2003), and Anand and Khanna (2000) agreed that strategic alliances are important in gaining competitive advantage for firms. The two or more companies in these strategic alliances are usually better off within the alliance than without it. AMYQ Ventures Limited gained additional sales revenue during the alliance, whereas the other companies gained additional revenue through the provision of agro-products such as fertiliser by AMYQ Ventures Limited. AMYQ Ventures Limited brought its capacity in attracting fertiliser products from its supplier, while the other firms contributed their warehouses and farmer databases to the alliance. In so doing, these farmers were targeted, and sales revenue improved for both parties.

The success of this alliance and the positive impact it had on AMYQ Ventures Limited was because of the commitment of the top management of the small businesses involved (Kalaiganam, Shankar, and Varadarajan, 2007). Hoffmann and Schlosser (2001) and BarNir and Smith (2002) advised small firms to use strategic alliances to overcome resource disadvantage and improve competitiveness and overall growth and profitability of the firms. The positive impact on the turnover at the end of 2019 is shown in the table and figure below:

Description	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Turnover	15,300	15,606	16,230	17,204	21,953	15,250	14,500	10,900	4,900	15,009
Cost of Sales	4,110	4,192	4,359	4,621	8,120	7,150	6,850	5,640	3,500	7,500
Gross Profit	11,190	11,414	11,871	12,583	13,833	8,100	7,650	5,260	1,400	7,509
Distribution, Marketing, Admin and Other expenses	3,500	3,700	3,250	3,120	11,150	6,901	6,550	4,050	4,500	2,850
Net Profit	7,690	7,714	8,621	9,463	2,683	1,199	1,100	1,210	(3,100)	4,659

Figure 5.3.3 AMYQ Turnover Track Record 2010 to 2019



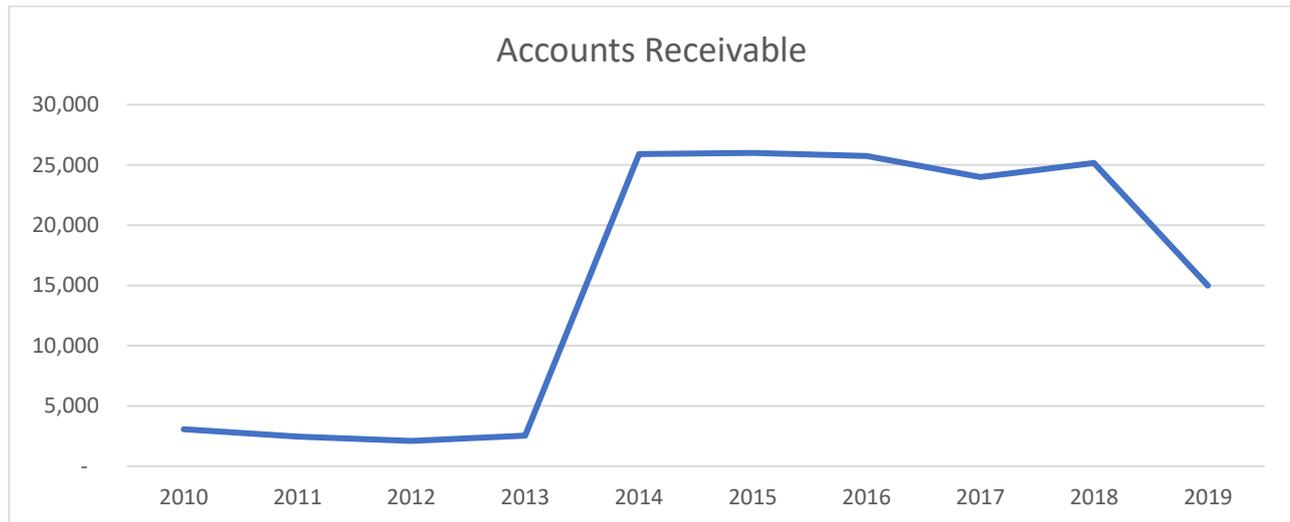
Turnover has improved from 4.9m (2018) to 15m (2019)

5.3.4 Action Taken: Debt Recovery through Debt Recovery Agents

As suggested by the learning set, we hired debt recovery consultants to help in recovering our debts. These agents would be paid from the recovered amounts. A 10% recovery fee was agreed. The efforts so far have been impressive. The receivable volume has reduced due to some gains that have been made in this regard. The accounts receivable balance in 2018 was N25.15m, while by 2019 it had been reduced to N15m. Wisniewski (2022) posits that small businesses can improve their liquidity through the recovery of debts. These

recoveries can improve cash flow and profit, and some may be used to pay part of the employees' salaries. Sokołowska and Wiśniewski (2015) reported that the financial viability of small companies depends on their ability to meet sales demands and collect receivables from the sales of goods and services to customers. The efficiency and effectiveness of debt recovery play a crucial role in determining the liquidity of a small business.

Figure 5: Account Receivable Chart



Accounts receivable has reduced from 25m in 2018 to 15m in 2019.

5.3.5 Improved Organisational Change Readiness

Past organisational changes in AMYQ Ventures Limited had a negative impact on the employees because they created insecurity and doubts in their minds, which led to negative behavioural tendencies towards the change. Poor communication was a major cause of increased resistance to change. Here, however, I used open communication regarding the crisis and uncertainty to improve the employees' understanding.

A positive collective employee behavioural change was necessary to achieve positive readiness for organisational change. In this research, the tone for organisational change has been set by the owner-manager/researcher. The leadership of a small firm had a huge role to play in getting the employees ready for change (Oakland and Tanner, 2007). The employees' readiness for impending change within the organisation also affects the organisation's readiness to change. The research has completely improved the employees' understanding of the problems being faced and the change prospects therein. It was evident that better communication between me and the employees during the interviews (Sections

4.3.1 and 4.3.2) led to a better understanding of the context of the problems. This has improved their willingness to participate in the changes being proposed and actions being taken in the organisation. In rating me, employees exercised some form of power and authority in the direction of the research (Holt et al., 2007). They also made useful contributions to the interest of the business. Their acceptance of punitive measures for absentee employers, as shown in Section 4.5.3, is a vital sign of support for the success of the research. In Section 4.5.4, employees suggested and agreed on the use of debt collectors to chase the recovery of our receivables.

The organisational change readiness has dramatically improved. Molineux et al. (2020) supported this improved change, as they argued that the use of an action learning approach leads to more successful outcomes than other approaches. The approach led to a collective behaviour change, and this was necessary for the effective implementation of the change and its anticipated benefits (Cole, Harris, and Bernerth, 2006; Madsen, Miller, and John, 2005; Weiner, 2009), such as reduced absenteeism in the company, improved debt collection and reduction of receivables, improved motivation for the job, increased revenue from sales, and growth of the business.

5.4 AMYQ Ventures Limited Leadership and Implications

5.4.1 Family Business and Owner-Manager

The research revealed that AMYQ Ventures Limited is a family business, and I as the owner-manager have overall leadership responsibilities, as shown in Section 4.2.7. This outcome was critical in understanding the impact of leadership in a small family business. The ownership, involvement in the operation, and employees' perceptions were pivotal to the research outcome.

AMYQ Ventures Limited's ownership rests on my ability and capabilities, and this has the potential to affect other activities in the firm. Since control was in my hands, decision-making was very quick, but the research revealed that my decisions have not all had positive impacts on the business. The unilateral decision to enter the feed distribution business without consulting members of the senior or junior staff led to severe consequences. Inadequate due diligence was done, and this led to losses for AMYQ, further contributing

to the business's enormous volume of receivables. At the time of writing this thesis, the business had over twenty-five million naira (about USD70,000) in bad debt, attributable to the failed feed distribution business, which has since been stopped.

I was involved in the day-to-day running of the business, but my lack of experience in crisis forecasting, planning, and management was brought to the fore. The impact of this lack of experience can be ameliorated with the right mindset in terms of sensemaking of situations and having the right attitude (Doern, 2016). My belief that the research process will have a positive impact on the firm's crisis management has rubbed off on the employees too.

5.4.2 Empowerment and Organisational Effectiveness

The results from this research (Section 4.3.1) showed that the senior staff of the organisation were worried that they were not empowered to take individual decisions. They felt that I was the sole decision-maker, and this has sometimes made the turn-around time on some functions too slow. The suggestion of greater empowerment for senior management showed that they are not happy with the present pre-crisis and crisis positions of the company. All the senior staff agreed that I did not give them any opportunities to make decisions such as expense approvals, authorisation of employees' annual vacations, and staff-related matters. I believe that their suggestion for change is well deserved and will lead to better organisational commitment and effectiveness. In my opinion, the empowerment of the senior staff will lead to better job satisfaction and motivation for the change being suggested during the crisis. In line with Luecke (2003) and Kroth (2007), empowerment improves employees' energy and job satisfaction, thereby enhancing their commitment to the job and crisis resolution. My opinion that empowerment motivates employees towards a problem-solving mindset is supported by Chebat and Kollias (2006). It allows employees to practice their proficiencies and engage in actions that will be beneficial to the organisation. Empowered employees demonstrate greater use of their initiative in performing their duties.

5.4.3 AMYQ Leadership Competencies During Crisis

Organisational leadership during normal times is different from leadership during crisis. Although they both require effective and efficient leadership competencies, it is more

appropriate for the leadership to focus on quick interventions and survival of the company during the crisis. Due to the ambiguity and time constraints and limited information, crisis leadership require immediate and decisive action (James and Wooten, 2010).

The research has identified appropriate leadership competencies to be adopted during crisis and uncertainty, especially for a small firm. Reviewing Section 4.2, whereby the employees rated my crisis leadership competencies using the 360-degree evaluation questionnaire shown in Appendix 7, one can understand the skills needed to address the crisis. In AMYQ Ventures Limited, it was necessary to identify the stage of the crisis being faced by the small firm. The research showed that AMYQ was in the damage control and containment stage (Figure 3, Table 1a, and Figure 4.1), which was characterised by management's eagerness to reduce the impact of the problem on the organisation. The goal here was to limit the financial, reputational, and other threats that may affect the survival of AMYQ Ventures Limited (James and Wooten, 2010).

First, the research has shown that participative leadership skill is vital in managing crisis and uncertainty. Participative leadership allowed the employees to collaborate with me in solving the crisis being faced. In the interviews of the senior and junior members of the organisation, guided by the interview questions outlined in Appendix D, a range of suggestions were made.

By agreeing to use action learning methodology in this research, I sought and received the consent of AMYQ Ventures Limited employees for their participation in the research. This has improved communication within the organisation and enhanced the understanding of the crisis and uncertainty affecting the company. Proper and effective communication is one of the competencies required for the stage of the crisis being faced by AMYQ Ventures Limited. I used this competency to improve the employees' perception about the organisation, thus positively affecting their readiness to change their mindset (James and Wooten, 2010; Moynihan, 2008). I believe that my honest and open communication has equally created in the minds of employees a need to support and accept that the problems need a solution. This transparency has enabled me to connect with the employees emotionally and psychologically. In my opinion, small business leaders must communicate effectively during crises to reduce the resistance to change found in some employees.

Schwartz and Sulitzeanu-Kenan (2004) posited that a perception of a problem brings about the desire to find solutions, and this is seen through the changed behaviour and attitude of stakeholders that are affected by the problem.

Another competency that has been revealed through this research is risk-taking. Employees of AMYQ Ventures Limited have suggested that the company should meet and form alliances with other agro-dealers (competition). This suggestion, on the face of it, looks absurd. However, my willingness to give this a second thought showed that I was willing to take risks amid the crisis and uncertainty. The company has acted accordingly, and these alliances have yielded more sales and profit for the benefit of the company. My research finding was that leaders must be able to think broadly and unconventionally. This attribute of crisis leaders highlights that it is essential that they quickly identify new approaches when faced with severe crisis and uncertainty. The ability to adapt quickly to a changing environment and try new ways of doing business will always lead to effective containment of crisis.

While communication and risk-taking are appropriate competencies during the damage control and containment stage of a crisis, the organisational leadership must also be ready to make decisions. The management of the small business must be able to make bold decisions during this stage of the crisis. In this research, AMYQ Ventures Limited has quickly appointed debt recovery agents to improve the recovery of overdue receivables. I have also appointed an HR/Admin Officer and approved the use of penalties and pay deductions as a means of curbing staff absenteeism. These are bold decisions that have been taken for the interest of the firm. Small firms must not allow negative emotions of fear and anxiety to prevent them from taking tough decisions during periods of crisis and uncertainty.

5.5 Action Researcher and Organisational Leadership

5.5.1 Organisational Learning

Rowden (2001) posited that leaders of small firms should encourage learning throughout their organisation. The use of action learning and other strategies for data collection have further improved the employees' knowledge about the organisation (Pedler, 2008; Coghlan

and Pedler, 2006). I believe that the experience gained during this crisis presents serious learning points for me, the employees, and the organisation.

I started this project with an open mind and have been committed to finding solutions in collaboration with the employees. Being the first action learning project that I have undertaken, the experience has been of immense value. The thesis and insider research have improved my understanding of the employees and their various perspectives on the crisis and uncertainty being faced by the company. Employee problems such as unpaid salaries, poor attitude and absenteeism, and the feeling of not being empowered are now well known. The organisational problem of over-aged receivables and dwindling sales, cash flow, and profit are also apparent and well defined through this thesis.

The participatory, democratic, and collaborative nature of the research (Coghlan and Rashford, 2006) has made the organisational context very transparent. The small firm was under severe internal crisis caused by employees and the actions of the leadership. Although there were external problems, such as non-payment of invoices by the government and other private companies, the research has focused on ways in which the leadership of a small firm can take actions that will be relevant and effective when they are faced with crisis and uncertainty.

The research can also be termed a change project, in line with Buono and Kerber's (2008) model of guided change, since it encouraged collaborative engagement with stakeholders (the employees). In addition, it also involved multiple cycles of action and reflection. During the administration of this change, there was a need to reduce employees' resistance to change by using effective and honest communication of the problems facing the company and taking decisions that would reduce pain, fear, and anxiety while improving trust and confidence in the leadership.

Organisational learning was vital in managing crises and uncertainty in this small firm. I was responsible for building a learning organisation, and this has enabled the firm to use the experiences gained from the crisis in a positive manner (Lengnick-Hall and Inocencio-Gray, 2013). This conducive environment has entrenched innovation, creativity, and

learning in AMYQ Ventures Limited. For example, more open collaboration, discussions and deliberations between the staff and me has led to a new way of doing business. We are now collaborating with some of our competitors to sell more agro-input to customers. Also, the employees are now more committed and motivated, and have reduced their absenteeism. Furthermore, we have started using debt collectors to drive debt collection, and we are not parting with money in advance. The fees are paid from their recovered amounts. I believe that for a small firm, these actions were crucial in managing the response time towards a crisis and the opportunities that may be present during the uncertainties.

5.5.2 Managing power and politics within AMYQ

The research had political elements too, and this was evident from my position as an insider-researcher. I had to manage the political and power dynamics from two platforms: the researcher platform and the owner-manager platform. During the research, there were concerns about how the employees would receive the request for consent to participate. I knew that the problems of the firm might be associated with my actions and inactions as owner-manager. I therefore had to ensure open and honest communication with employees to elicit their support. As the owner-manager of the firm, I also wanted to save the company and work with the employees in a way that would bring positive results. I wanted immediate changes that would give positive results. However, I felt that the pace of the research was sometimes slow due to the need to listen and discuss ideas constructively and reflexively with the employees before implementation.

My role duality in this research was, therefore, critical in successfully completing the project. Holian and Coghlan (2013) cited that role duality can lead to role conflicts and ambiguity. In my opinion, conflicts were managed appropriately due to the decision-making authority that I also enjoy as the owner of the company. In some cases, I assured the employees that the management was keen to quickly implement changes irrespective of the sources of the suggestions and contributions. Senior and junior staff members were encouraged to speak up during interviews for the benefit of the research and the organisation. Managing their diverse mindsets and perspectives led to the unanimous decision to penalise absentees and deduct part of their salaries, and these steps have led to a reduction in absenteeism records in the organisation.

5.5.3 Implementing Change and Acting

It was necessary to discuss the implementation of the changes that have impacted positively on the organisation under review. However, I will start by saying that no change can be effectively implemented without the buy-in of the employees. I had earlier posited in Section 4.5.2 that employees are the major stakeholders in this research and must give their support to have a successful change process. Employees must have sufficient readiness to change to enable the research objective to be accomplished. Without this readiness, employees' initial support for the change initiatives will be lacking (Armenakis, Harris, and Field, 1999; Jones, Jimmieson, and Griffiths, 2005; Weeks et al., 2004), and this will affect the quality of the research and the objectives of the study. It was necessary, therefore, to elicit this readiness. In my view, readiness to change removed or reduced the conflicts and differences between the employees and the organisational leadership. My objective of solving the problems of uncertainty and crisis was aligned to the beliefs and cognitions of the employees (Jones, Jimmieson, and Griffiths, 2005; Weeks et al., 2004) due to this readiness to change. The employees realised that their long outstanding unpaid salaries and poor sales of the company products needed to be improved. They now believed that the success of the project would have a positive impact on their situation and that of the company.

This research involved acting and evaluating the impact of the action during the research. In a way, we have taken some quick actions whose impact has been effective on the organisation. Notable amongst these actions have been the use of sanctions and penalties to curb absenteeism. In addition to this, the payment of salaries to staff has also improved their motivation for the research and their jobs. These actions were research-based and have improved the wellbeing of the employees and the organisation. In the area of inter-firm relationship, alliances have been formed with competitors, namely Chirozik Limited, Uchechi Associates, and AIK Limited. These partnerships have improved sales and profit for all parties. Although no significant result has been noticed in our drive to recover overdue receivables from debtors, the appointment of consultants as debt collectors and the agreement to pay them from their recoveries has freed up some of our cash-flow for business. The 360-degree evaluation of my leadership ability was a significant turning point, as most of the employees used it as a means of expressing their honest views about the

company and the leadership. Within the organisation, the appointment of one of the senior staff to oversee human resources and administration has been acknowledged positively by the employees. Such action has led to the identification of training programmes that will improve staff time management and commitment to the job. Also, employees and their families have been registered for pension and health insurance schemes: a situation that did not exist before the research

5.5.4 Managing the Organisational Change and Politics

The research objective was to reduce the effect of the crisis faced by AMYQ Ventures Limited. There was an urgent need to create an understanding and belief within the organisation that these identified problems will be solved. Managing the organisational change required sense-making that would drive the collective action of the employees and me. A clear and compelling case for seeking solutions (Kotter, 2007) for the organisation's problems was used to reduce resistance to change. My position and context as the researcher were shared with all employees, and their consent showed an acceptance of the objectives. The total commitment that I had as the business owner enhanced their understanding and acceptance of the changes that would be proposed during the research. Initial interventions were also focused on the actions that would have an immediate impact on the employees. The employees wanted quick payment of their salaries. Although this was difficult to do, I also wanted to increase sales in order to generate enough cash for salary payments. Employees were therefore willing to seek solutions that would improve revenue, as this would enable payment of their salaries.

I also connected with the employees as an insider. I am a member of the organisation and I aligned myself towards employee issues while seeking practical, research-based actions. I had access to information about the employees, and this helped in managing the politics within the system. Senior and junior staff were encouraged to give honest answers and suggestions without the fear of being punished.

5.5.5 Employee Participation through Better Welfare and Motivation:

Based on the observations and related to the interview questions designed to elicit the actions and changes that the employees would like to see in the organisation, all the

employees were unanimous in desiring better employee welfare and motivation. They all wanted improvements in their welfare package and believed that these would also improve their motivation. The most significant aspect of employee welfare was the amount of salary that is being paid to employees. Participants confirmed that AMYQ Ventures Limited's employee welfare package was inadequate and did not compare favourably with other companies of similar age and size. They gave the examples of Chirozik Limited and AIK Limited, both of which had better pay structures than AMYQ Ventures Limited. Ugoani (2013, 2016) argued that poor treatment of employees will lead to high staff turnover and a low retention rate, which may be detrimental to staff productivity. This has been identified to be true among the staff of AMYQ Ventures Limited and is due to non-payment of their outstanding salaries.

The employees were unanimous in canvassing for a pension scheme and health insurance for all. These are areas that the company has never considered in the past, since most of the business is unstructured. In addition, seven employees suggested that the firm should have overtime pay to encourage staff to come to work on weekends to clear backlogs of reports and reconciliation issues. However, other employees argued that this would bring about a situation where work was left undone until the weekend.

Another area of concern for all the employees was related to learning and self-development. All employees felt that the organisation was not training and supporting them with appropriate learning opportunities. Batra (2017), Batra and Pollitt (2014) and Rowden and Conine (2005) reported that informal and formal learning opportunities enhance employees' skills, and these can translate to better job performance. They all suggested that the organisation should facilitate employees' learning and training by enrolling them in programs organised by the Federal Ministry of Agriculture, as these were usually free for agro-dealers, although the company would have to pay for their transportation to Abuja and accommodation expenses. A few suggested that consultants from the Industrial Training Fund and the Bank of Industries could be approached to request training programs that would improve employee performance for the benefit of AMYQ Ventures Limited.

Empowered employees are usually motivated for the business in which they find themselves. AMYQ Ventures Limited senior staff and junior staff recalled I make all the decisions in the business and leaves them with little room for creativity. They felt constrained in taking crucial decisions, and this made it extremely difficult for them to perform their roles effectively. They therefore suggested that employee morale could be boosted if I empowered them to make decisions for the greater good of the business. Abbott (2003) supported this view and argued that highly empowered employees are usually more motivated in their organisations, as this gives them opportunities for decision-making, learning, communication, and growth of the business.

5.6 Chapter Summary

The research objective of this thesis was to find appropriate leadership actions that would reduce the impact of crisis and uncertainty on a small firm: AMYQ Ventures Limited. I was focused on improving employees' morale and eliciting their support and readiness for change for the interest of the business. The organisation was facing severe cash-flow problems and dwindling sales. Employees were not motivated and felt that the non-payment of their salaries for a long time showed a lack of support and insensitivity on my part as owner-manager. Their performance level was low, and the research needed to increase organisational readiness for change. This was improved through effective communication to improve sense-making about the crisis and uncertainty and the urgent need to work together for the greater good. Organisational members perceived this need for change and supported the research thoroughly. The collaboration of AMYQ Ventures Limited with competition was suggested by the employees, and this strategy is supported by evidence from prior research.

The stage of the crisis has been identified as the damage control and containment stage, as shown in Figure 3. Some leadership competencies required for effective crisis management in a small firm (within this stage) were identified through interviews, observation, and employees' 360-degree evaluation of me as the owner-manager. The collaboration between me and the employees ensured that action was taken during the research and the evaluation of the impact of this action has been positive so far. I have identified that effective communication, risk-taking, and change in the organisational decision-making attitude are

critical competencies for the leadership of a small firm to manage a crisis. In addition, the leadership must pay attention to creating an atmosphere where the followers will trust the intentions and capability of the company leaders. Empowerment of the employees and the use of appropriate penalties are some of the means of improving staff participation during the crisis.

Chapter 6

Conclusion and Recommendations

6. Introduction

This study has allowed me to chronicle my transition from being a bank employee to being a small business owner. My experience and difficulties in managing the business through an autocratic leadership style have been presented. I have used action learning methodologies to predict appropriate leadership actions for a small firm that is faced with commercial and operational problems. In this chapter, I will focus on elucidating the learning outcomes of my research, especially the practice-oriented ones, and recommendations to other entrepreneurs that might be useful in managing their businesses.

6.1 Reflection on Action Learning Methodology

This research was qualitative and was situated within the surroundings of the participants (employees) and aimed at solving their organisational problems. I studied my organisation and utilised feedback from employees to interpret the problems faced by the business and find solutions to them (Marshall and Rossman, 2010). The action learning methodology was chosen and utilised for this research. Its effectiveness in the study of people and communities with the view of solving problems is well known. Reason and Bradbury (2008) argued that action learning is a participatory and collaborative effort that develops practical knowledge and understanding. I chose action learning in the belief that it would help me to solve a known issue in my organisation, and this reflects Shani and Pasmore's (2010) position that action learning is an emerging process of collaboration and co-inquiry that applies human behaviour and knowledge towards a better understanding of an organisation in solving a real organisation issue. The action learning methodology chosen justifies Coghlan and Brannick's (2014) statement that the action learning approach can be used to study one's own organisation. It is therefore an insider action learning process because I was a full member of the organisation being studied. I am the owner-manager of the business (AMYQ Ventures Limited) and was also involved in the day-to-day operations of the business while also seeking solutions to its organisational problem, Initially, I identified serious issues of high company debts, low profitability, the paucity of funds and cash flow, low employee morale, and an overall uncertain future for the business.

In fact, as the owner-manager, I considered filing for bankruptcy and closing the business due to the overwhelming challenges it was facing. A major cause of the problem was the non-payment of invoices for work done for the Federal Government of Nigeria during their government-sponsored agricultural program for farmers in 2014. The GESS was an agricultural input subsidy for farmers as a way of boosting agricultural production nationwide and reducing costs to farmers. A change in government after the general elections of 2015 put a dramatic stop to the program. This inconsistency of government policy created a lot of uncertainty and crisis for many businesses in the country, especially for small businesses such as AMYQ Ventures Limited. The thesis was an effort towards unravelling appropriate leadership skills that small businesses should use to manage crisis and uncertainty, with a focus on AMYQ Ventures Limited. Although the company's problems are commercial and operational in nature, they also represent the actions or inactions of my leadership, as I am the person who takes all the decisions in the organisation.

A 360-degree evaluation of me as the owner, interviews with employees, action learning deliberations, observation, and questionnaires were used as the data collection tools and improved the quality and integrity of the research findings (Creswell, 2013; Joslin and Muller, 2016). The different and honest perspectives of the employees during the research enabled me to have a better understanding of the problems being faced by the business. Without the input of the participants in this study, it would have been challenging to know the different areas of concern necessary to find solutions.

My reflection on this research journey and action learning methodology also confirmed two main goals that every action learning study should have. These are to solve a problem and to contribute to the body of knowledge. The combination of actions taken, impacts, and reflections thereof made this study suitable for the organisational problem being discussed. Its in-depth analysis and responses were useful in real time, especially during the interactive interviews and action learning meetings. In a way, the employees were co-researchers within the framework of the system, and their inputs were valuable to the success of the research. The collaboration and participatory nature of the process led to the use of multiple perspectives during the data collection process. This has led to more reflection and learning within the small company. The process has contributed to the stability of the ailing firm

while also contributing important information to other small business owners who might face similar challenges. It also supports contingency leadership and small business crisis leadership within the Nigerian context.

6.2 Learning Outcome 1: Personal Learning and Growth as a Manager of my Business

This research has improved my understanding of the organisation and the employees. While it has given some positive results, efforts are still ongoing to improve the business. The employees have participated actively and made this project a success. This has improved the atmosphere within the firm and encouraged me to be creative in preparing for and managing any future crisis that may occur, not only in the organisation. Managing the relationships within the firm has become more comfortable, since there has been improved communication and trust between me and the senior and junior employees. Indeed, as an insider researcher, I have greatly improved my listening and reflective skills. Family members within the firm now know that they must sit up or be sanctioned by the HR Manager accordingly. There is a need for continuous meetings within the firm and I am willing to deliberate with employees and consider their suggestions for the interest of the firm.

Before the commencement of this research, I felt that the crisis and uncertainty that AMYQ Ventures Limited was facing would lead to the demise of the company. The burden of having unhappy employees, unpaid bills and salaries, over-aged receivables, low cash-flow and not knowing when the new funds will come into the business was a nightmare before the opportunity arose to conduct this research. In starting this research project, I gave a personal commitment to myself that I would try and see the research to completion, although I was initially sceptical. Some studies about action learning and the impact it may have on research subjects and problems encouraged me to start the journey.

I also had a misconception about leading an organisation during a crisis. My thinking was that leading during ordinary times and leading during crises would be the same for the business owner. However, leadership is markedly different in crisis and noncrisis situations. Some leaders might be successful during normal times but fail in a crisis (James and Wooten, 2010). Thus, my initial misconception was later debunked by the literature and the research process. Decisions made during ordinary times and those made during uncertainty and

crisis may never be the same. Crisis leadership has enabled AMYQ to create organisational changes for the benefit of its stakeholders.

In this research, I have learnt that crisis leadership is different from leadership during ordinary times. Leading under pressure requires specific skills that are unique and different from those required in non-crisis situations. Owner-managers like me should be aware of the different phases of their small businesses and acquire specific skills necessary for solving organisational problems when they arise. In addition, identifying the different stages of crisis when they occur is also important. According to James and Wooten (2010), there are different leadership competencies that are unique to the effective management of crises in the different phases. The contingency approach to leadership is therefore appropriate, as it supports the analysis of the external and internal situation of the business before making decisions that will be tailored to solving the problem. This research has improved my questioning, listening, and reflection skills (Grint, 2005; Marquardt, 2007; Pedler, 2008) in a way that is suitable for the generation of new ideas. I have understood that although I am part of the company's problem, I am also part of the solution. These are thoughts that have made me humble throughout the project.

I believe that AMYQ Ventures Limited will benefit immensely by looking at Phases 4 and 5 of the crisis management model (Figure 3) suggested by James and Wooten (2010). These are the business recovery and learning phases, respectively. These phases have become necessary in documenting the crisis containment and critical activities that have impacted positively on the issue. Prevention of future crises through learning, behavioural changes, and organisational changes should be paramount now.

Brockner and James (2008) believed that adopting a reactive strategy to a crisis will be counterproductive. This will be very true for small firms, which can be left with severe consequences before a solution can be seen. The learning for AMYQ lies in its leadership to recognise the importance of early detection of crisis and the use of weekly meetings to address issues that are hurting the firm while scanning the business environment for external threats. These actions will promote resilience within the organisation (Sutcliffe and Vogus, 2003). In Nigeria, it is necessary to have a crisis plan due to the ever-changing

business environment caused by the government's political and economic somersaults. Post-crisis learning and reflection will allow us to use our experience to develop routines and behaviours that will change our organisational processes. My personal learning and that of the employees will be useful in the future.

6.3 Learning Outcome 2: Collaboration Between Owner-Managers and Employees

The collaboration between me and the employees has played a vital role in the execution of the research suggestions and their widespread support and acceptance by all. While focusing on internal issues such as absenteeism and apathy towards work, my action was in line with the suggestions from Robbins and Coutler (2015) and Jones and George (2013), who posited that the performance and operations of small firms would always be affected by external and internal factors. Indeed, AMYQ was affected mainly by the government's refusal to pay its invoices and the change in government policy which is ever-present in Nigeria. While organisations in developed countries can anticipate and manage their social, political, economic, and business better, the Nigerian context is highly unpredictable. Political, environmental, and economic uncertainty due to unstable governance and changes in government policies will always affect small businesses (Arieftiara, Utama, and Wardhani, 2017; Efstathios, 2012; Haroon and Konstantinos, 2017; Masayuki, 2016; Stein and Wang, 2017), especially in Nigeria. A well-documented crisis management framework may be useful, especially the use of Burnett's (1998) model, as shown in Figure 1.

However, the research has shown that there are different stages of crisis, as depicted by Mitroff (2005, 2003), and AMYQ Ventures Limited is in the damage control and containment stage, where the management and employees are seeking to reduce the impact and adverse effects of the crisis. The leadership competencies of communicating, risk-taking, and decision-making have been useful, and support James and Wooten (2010), as shown in Table 1.

6.4 Learning Outcome 3: Importance of Effective Communication During Crisis

In determining the appropriate leadership competencies for the crisis, the research findings support that organisational leadership should have an effective communication, risk-taking,

and decision-making attitude. As the owner-manager of AMYQ, I informed the employees of the crisis and asked for their consent and participation during the research. Creating a better understanding was an appropriate competency in this crisis leadership, as posited by Bundy et al. (2017), James and Wooten (2010), and Wooten and James (2008). This has brought clarity and enhanced trust within the organisation, as employees have become interested in ensuring that the organisation survives for the benefit of all. In the interviews, employee responses were truthful and encouraging towards me. I must posit that sometimes the employees felt very uncomfortable and showed that I needed to change my leadership style. One of the crisis leadership competencies, as posited by James and Wooten (2010), is building trust during and after the crisis. My truthfulness and consistency in words and actions have encouraged the employees to trust me. This has improved my integrity, which is a critical competency during crisis and uncertainty (McShane, Sharma, and von Gilnow, 2013).

Another outcome of the research is the appointment of an HR/Admin Manager to improve employee welfare while ensuring that organisational resources are optimally deployed and utilised. According to McCracken and Wallace (2000), HR activities are vital and can enhance leadership competencies, primarily when geared towards fostering a learning culture (Ruona, Lynham, and Chermack, 2003). I believe that the company's actions have paid off through the introduction of a pension program and a health insurance plan for employees and their families. In addition, periodic training is another outcome that has been welcomed by all the staff.

6.5 Learning Outcome 4: Crisis as an Opportunity and Change

A crisis is usually a threatening situation for companies, especially small firms. Effective crisis management would mean that organisational leadership is willing to tackle the threat to reduce the effects of the crisis on the organisation. However, this mindset alone may create a blind spot for the organisation, as potential opportunities may be available during this period of instability. Crisis has always been regarded as an adverse event that requires an emotional response, and this often renders leaders restricted in their processing of information and solution identification (Chattopadhyay, Glick, and Huber 2001). Having an

open mind during this project has been extremely helpful. However, framing the organisation's problem as an opportunity rather than a threat may have been able to affect the subsequent handling process. This may be another way of looking at the issues that befall organisations and may evoke a different interpretation and response from stakeholders. At the beginning of the research, my primary goal was to quickly get the company out of harm and reduce the pressure of dwindling cash-flow. I never imagined that an opportunity to form alliances with competition could help my organisation. Framing the narrative in the form of an opportunity rather than a threat may even drive leaders towards a more strategic attempt to harness those opportunities. I now know that a good crisis leader sees opportunities in crisis, and in so doing, inspires positive organisational changes accordingly. According to James and Wooten (2010), competent crisis handlers must view crisis through the lens of opportunity. For a small firm, it is advisable to have a mindset of learning and change management in order to undertake a successful attempt to solve the firm's problems.

6.6 Learning Outcome 5: Cooperating and Forming Alliances with Competitors

One of the positive outcomes of this research has been the formation of alliances with the competition. Sales of fertiliser products have increased due to the firm's new partnerships with Chirozik Limited, AIK Limited, and Uchechi Associates. These firms have many farmers, and AMYQ receives a commission for each bag of fertiliser it supplies on credit to these firms. My view of this competition-cooperation relationship is that the firms have developed a trust-based relationship where resources are shared, thus leading to a reduction in uncertainty. The market commonality of the known farmer database for the agro-program has the effect of reducing marketing, transportation, and delivery costs (Chen, Su, and Tsai, 2007). The companies involved have relied on the availability of farmers in the competitors' centres to sell more fertiliser and other agro-inputs. Without these alliances, the firms will sell less in their various approved centres. I have learnt that the reduction of inter-firm rivalry and the cooperation between the firms have enhanced the bottom line of the participating firms through reductions in the cost of sales and the increment of total sales for the different products (Gnyawali and Park, 2009; Levin and McDonald, 2006). This

collective desire to sell these products during the GESS has therefore drawn the competing companies together to enable them to share resources that they lack when they work alone.

6.7 Recommendations to Other Business Owners

AMYQ Ventures Limited has now learnt that crisis can also be beneficial (Bundy et al., 2017; Vaartjes, 2010; Vardarlier, 2016). Owner-managers must take advantage of this situation and maximise the opportunities while resolving the crisis (Haddon, Loughlin, and McNally, 2015; Hale, 2013; Lowman, 2001; Wooten and James, 2008). Sales have been improved through the alliances formed with competitions such as Chirozik Limited, AIK Ltd, and Uchechi Associates. This has been a learning point for the small firm, and Rowden (2001) believed that this is vital in managing crisis and uncertainty. The creation of this learning environment will improve the small firm's capability in managing future crises and uncertainty (Auster, Wylie, and Valente, 2005; Balogun, Hailey, and Cleaver, 2015), thus reforming the organisation's mindset (Wooten and James, 2010).

Another recommendation for other entrepreneurs is that they should focus on the problems that have been identified. In this thesis, I made quick decisions about reducing absenteeism, improving the recovery of debts, and motivation of employees through the payment of some of their salaries. The appointment of an HR/Admin manager and the approval of the alliances with competition have yielded positive results. The motivation of employees during crisis and uncertainty has created teamwork and collaboration within the organisation (Crevani, Lindgren, and Packendorff, 2010; Raelin, 2011), and behavioural change is a vital precursor to gaining support during the crisis, as supported by the leaderful leadership theory. The motivational role of the business leaders will enhance employee performance and innovation (Ashkanasy and Tse, 2000; Mayfield and Mayfield, 2004).

Due to the context of the small firm (struggling in the face of crisis and uncertainty), I believed that taking these quick decisions was also in line with the contingency theory of leadership. The situation (crisis and uncertainty) has demanded immediate action in the interest of the employees and the organisation (Lutans, 2011; Morgan, 2007). The motivation of the employees also followed the Path-Goal model of leadership, which is an appropriate

strategy, being supportive, achievement-oriented, directive, and participative (Armstrong, 2012). Using a dynamic leadership style during a crisis is essential for small firms. I believe that this has allowed me to match my actions based on the situation at hand rather than using only one type of leadership style. Being dynamic also improves the outcomes of a leader's actions and encourages learning within the organisation (Wooten and James, 2010).

Small firms and their owners should use a combination of different strategies for effective risk and crisis management. Collaboration and diversification are effective risk management strategies utilised by AMYQ Ventures Limited. The government can also encourage collaboration between small firms by giving them incentives (such as tax breaks) to work together for the benefit of farmers. The government should encourage small firms by paying their invoices promptly and keep their promises. The agricultural sector of the economy will suffer if small firms are not considered when formulating policies. SME-friendly policies should be formulated by the government while developing infrastructures and credit schemes that will be of benefit to the firms. Small business owners must understand this risk and plan accordingly.

Owners of small businesses may also improve resilience through their perceptions of formal crisis management planning (Herbane, 2013), and through their flexibility, patience, and constant rethinking of the business environment (Berman, 2009). Bullough and Renko (2013) believed that leaders' self-efficacy and resilience play a key role in small businesses that are facing challenging times. Doern (2016) agreed that the resiliency of small firms makes them less vulnerable to crises. AMYQ and other business owners can achieve this by both drawing on and adapting their experiences, developing a mindset that is both anticipatory and containment-focused in nature. We can also invest in building resources that would make us flexible and adaptable during unforeseen circumstances.

6.8 Limitations of the Study

This research has covered a small company - AMYQ Ventures Limited - and its related problem within a developing country (Nigeria). The goal of this research process was to generate actionable knowledge that is specific to the company to help solve its dwindling

business performance, poor attitude to work by employees, an excessive portfolio of receivables, and problems with falling revenue. The results of this research may not be suitable or applicable in different contexts or economies. In many developed countries, there are stable political, economic, social, and business environments. As such, issues such as non-payment of invoices by governments may not arise. In addition, there is government support for businesses by way of reduced taxes. In this Nigerian context, small firms even provide the country's infrastructure, such as electricity, access roads, and water. According to Coghlan and Brannick (2014), organisational characteristics such as history, informal and formal structures, resources, and readiness to change will affect the research outcomes. Diverse participant perspectives and experiences may lead to different ideas and engagements between them and myself.

Another limitation of this study is in the industry where AMYQ Ventures Limited is positioned. AMYQ Ventures Limited is primarily an agro-dealer in the agricultural sector of the Nigerian economy. Its major client is the Federal Government of Nigeria, as it participates actively in the government's agro-input support program for the benefit of farmers and to improve food production. Small businesses in other sectors of the economy, such as manufacturing, telecommunications, financial services, and advertising, may not have similar experiences.

AMYQ Ventures Limited has 15 employees, and this number may significantly influence the results. Small businesses that have up to 50 employees may present different views during the in-depth interview and 360-degree evaluation of leadership. Hansbrough, Lord, and Schyns (2015) posited that the accuracy of followers' ratings of their leaders might be subject to argument because they may be affected by followers' individual differences, contextual factors, and the type of measurement utilised. When followers recall information relating to their leader's behaviour in the past, information processing and the accuracy of retrieved information may be questioned. The potential biases in the followers' ratings of leadership behaviour using the questionnaire process may be a limitation of the study.

Another research limitation is in the context of the type of research that has been utilised. In this thesis, I acted as the researcher. I was also an insider and the owner-manager of the

business being investigated. It would seem reasonable to conduct similar research using an outsider and scholar for comparison. The pre-understanding, role duality and access to files within the organisation would provide a new template for this future research. Although I was aware of the prejudices and preconceived ideas about AMYQ Ventures Limited, I distanced myself from the company to reduce the bias.

6.9 Areas for Future Research

This research has indicated appropriate management actions that would be useful during crisis and uncertainty in a small organisation (AMYQ). The actions already taken and evaluated during this research showed that small firms could also have appropriate crisis leadership when the business owners take appropriate actions. Some questions about the research have opened new areas for further enquiry and research.

The context of the research was AMYQ Ventures Limited and the collaborative inquiry between the insider researcher and the employees of the organisation. The findings relate to the crisis phase of containment/damage control. It would be useful to further research the appropriate management skills that small firms should consider using during other phases of the crisis cycle.

Another critical area for further research would be to investigate the usefulness of a business continuity plan for small businesses. Small organisations should not wait until they are facing a crisis before learning how to cope with it. Effective business continuity plan templates for small businesses in Nigeria should be developed and made readily accessible. While this may be a challenging project to undertake due to the volatile political and economic conditions in the country, it would serve as a starting point for small businesses.

Finally, researchers may be interested in knowing the impact of the crisis on small businesses in other geographical locations in Nigeria, and on other sectors of the economy. This would lead to robust knowledge development and learning for small firms. Scholar practitioners could use these findings to develop practical theories of organisational learning in small firms. Overall, this would reduce the failure rate of small firms and improve their chances of survival in an ever-changing and crisis-laden environment.

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Appendices

Appendix A. Full Ethics Approval

Dear Mr.

Uchenna Ekeabu,

I am pleased to inform you that the DBA Ethics Committee has approved your application for ethical approval for your study. Details and conditions of the approval can be found below:

Committee Name: DBA Ethics Committee

Title of Study: Organisational Leadership of a Small Firm during Crises and Uncertainty

Student Investigator: Uchenna Ekeabu

School/Institute: School of Management. Approval Date: 06 November 2017.

The application was APPROVED subject to the following conditions:

The researchers must obtain ethical approval from a local research ethics committee if this is an international study.

University of Liverpool approval is subject to compliance with all relevant national legislative requirements if this is an international study.

All serious adverse events must be reported to the Sub-Committee within 24 hours of their occurrence, via the Research Integrity and Governance Officer (ethics@liv.ac.uk).

If it is proposed to make an amendment to the research, you should notify the Committee of the amendment.

This approval applies to the duration of the research. If it is proposed to extend the duration of the study as specified in the application form, the Committee should be notified.

Kind regards,

Hammad Akbar

DBA Ethics Committee University of Liverpool Management School in Partnership

Appendix B: Participant Consent Form



Research Participant Consent Form

Title of Research Project: Organisational Leadership of a Small Firm during Crises and Uncertainty

Researcher: Uchenna Ekeabu

Please initial box

- I confirm that I have agreed to participate in a research project conducted by Uchenna Ekeabu of the University of Liverpool with the above-mentioned research project title
- I confirm that I have read and have understood the information sheet dated 28 August 2017 for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions, and have had these answered satisfactorily.
- I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason, without my rights being affected and without any penalty. In addition, should I not wish to answer any particular question or questions, I am free to decline.
- I understand that, under the Data Protection Act, I can at any time ask for access to the information, I provide, and I can also request the destruction of that information if I wish.
- I understand that confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained and it will not be possible to identify me in any publications and the procedures regarding confidentiality have been clearly explained to me.
- I agree for the data collected from me to be used for the benefit of AMYQ VENTURES LTD.
- I understand and agree that my participation will be audio-recorded and I am aware of and consent to your use of these recordings for the purposes of this research study
- I understand that my responses will be kept strictly confidential. I give

permission for members of the research team to have access to my anonymised responses. I understand that my name will not be linked with the research materials and I will not be identified or identifiable in the report or reports that result from the research.

- I understand and agree that once I submit my data, it will become anonymised and I will therefore no longer be able to withdraw my data.
- I voluntarily agree to participate in the project
- I understand that other only the researcher and his research supervisor will have access to this data
- I understand that I will not be paid for my participation.
- I understand that if I feel uncomfortable in any way during an interview session, I have the right to decline to answer any question or to end the interview.

Participant Name	Date	Signature
Name of Person taking consent	Date	Signature
Researcher	Date	Signature

Student Researcher:

Name: Uchenna Ekeabu

Work Address: 10 Alade Close, Surulere, Lagos, Nigeria

Work Telephone: +2348033232753

Work Email: uchenna.ekeabu@online.liverpool.ac.uk

Research Supervisor:

Name: Dr. Solomon Fadun

Work Address: University of Liverpool Online, United Kingdom

Work Telephone: +447438016260



Appendix C: Research Participant Information Sheet

Committee on Research Ethics

Participant Information Sheet

1. Title of Study

Organisational Leadership of a Small Firm during Crises and Uncertainty

This thesis involves a research study of a small firm, AMYQ VENTURES LIMITED, aimed at finding appropriate management actions that will minimize the impact of the crises and uncertainty facing the company.

2. Version Number and Date

Version 001: 05/September/2017

3. Invitation Paragraph

I hereby invite you to participate in this research study. Before you decide whether to participate or not, it is necessary to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Kindly take time to read the following information carefully and feel free to ask me if you would like more information or if there are areas that you do not understand. Please also feel free to discuss this with your friends, family, and counsellors if you wish. I would like to stress that you do not have to accept this invitation and should only agree to take part if you want to. Participation is strictly voluntary.

4. What is the purpose of the study?

In line with the Thesis Proposal already approved, please find below the purpose of the study.

AMYQ Ventures Limited is a small company and involved in agro-dealership in Nigeria. AMYQ markets and sells agro-related products such as fertiliser and chemicals. It has participated in the Federal Government program called the Growth Enhancement Support Scheme (GESS) over the years. This program aims to provide subsidized fertiliser and other agro-input to farmers to improve agricultural production and poverty reduction. The company is now faced with poor liquidity occasioned by the continuous non-payment by the government for the 2014 GESS program. The change in government and political turmoil in Nigeria has led to changes and inconsistency in government policies. The government has therefore not run the program since the last change in Federal Government administration in 2015. The GESS Program contributes over 80% of AMYQ's revenue. The company is indebted to Skye Bank for over N80m (USD160, 000) and currently have not paid salary for over six months. Staff morale is very low, and the management is desirous in generating new businesses and income lines while also demanding the payment of its invoices by the government. AMYQ also has uncollected receivables from its customers. The Naira is the Nigeria unit of currency. The devaluation of Naira by over 150% has also impacted on the high cost of fertiliser in the market. Hence, the company is facing an uncertain future and an environment full of business crises.

The study will centre on leadership roles and desirable actions of management during times of uncertainty and crises. It will also focus on finding appropriate leadership actions that will be effective in motivating employees during crises. Hence, the study is expected to aid AMYQ Ventures Limited management in focusing their leadership skills and practices towards actions that will encourage employees to behave in a manner that will support the organisation as they aim to come out of the crises.

5. Why have I been chosen to take part?

This is a research project that involves the voluntary participation of employees of AMYQ Ventures Limited, and their input towards finding solutions to the organisational problem will be welcomed.

6. Do I have to take part?

Employee participation is voluntary, and all employees are free to withdraw at any time without explanation and without incurring a disadvantage or sanctions from the management and leadership of AMYQ Ventures Ltd.

7. What will happen if I take part?

You will be part of the research and will play an essential role in providing answers and your perspectives on the issues at hand. This is a research process and will rely on the collaboration between the researcher and the employees.

8. Expenses and / or payments

There will not be any expenses from the participant. AMYQ Ventures Limited will provide refreshments during meetings for the project. In addition, the company will provide telephone bill reimbursements when participants undertake to participate via the telephone. Whenever you have useful information and would want to call the researcher, please feel free, because you will be reimbursed for making such calls.

9. Are there any risks in taking part?

There are no risks that employees will suffer. Please, should you experience any discomfort or disadvantage as part of this study, kindly let the researcher know immediately. Please also remember that participation is voluntary.

10. Are there any benefits in taking part?

The primary benefit for taking part is that all participants will learn how the action learning process takes place. The positive impact of the findings will assist the company in their business. Employees will be better off if the company continues business and pays them their entitlements when due.

11. What if I am unhappy or if there is a problem?

All complaints will be handled through the Committee on Research Ethics complaints procedure:

“If you are unhappy, or if there is a problem, please feel free to let us know by contacting Uchenna Ekeabu (+2348033232753), and we will try to help. If you remain unhappy or have a complaint which you feel you cannot come to us with, you should contact the Research Governance Officer at ethics@liv.ac.uk. When contacting the Research Governance Officer, please provide details of the name or description of the study (so that it can be identified), the researcher involved, and the details of the complaint you wish to make.”

12. Will my participation be kept confidential?

Data will be collected through discussions and meetings between the researcher and the participants. Data will be stored securely and anonymised and will be used only for this study. It will be shared or utilised by the researcher and his supervisors only for use in this project. The data from this study will be stored for no less than five (5) years.

13. What will happen to the results of the study?

The results of this study will be made available to the participants once they ask for it and are likely to be published in an academic journal approved by the University of Liverpool. They will be accessible to the participants through the management of

the company, preferably printed on paper. Participants will not be identifiable from the results unless they have consented to such.

14. What will happen if I want to stop taking part?

Since participation is voluntary, participants can withdraw at any time, without explanation. Results up to the period of withdrawal may be used for the project; however, if you are happy for this to be done, you may request that they are destroyed, and no further use is made of them. The anonymity of such results and participants will also be protected.

15. Whom can I contact if I have further questions?

Name: Uchenna Ekeabu

Address: 10 Alade Close, Surulere, Lagos, Nigeria.

Phone: +2348033232753

Email: uchenna.ekeabu@online.liverpool.ac.uk

16. Duty of care to research participants

Research participants will be protected from any risk, whether intended or unintended. The researcher indemnifies the research participants in case of any financial risk or any other risk they may suffer as a result of their participation.

Researcher: Uchenna Ekeabu +2348033232753

Appendix D: Interview Guide

Thesis Topic: Organisational Leadership of a Small Firm during Crises and Uncertainty

Time of interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

Position of interviewee:

Questions:

12. What problems do you think are being faced by AMYQ Ventures Limited?
13. Have you received adequate communication from management concerning the problems and do you consider this adequate?
14. What are your views concerning the role of the owner-manager in these problems?
15. What are the actions of your organisational management that may reduce the effect of the problems on employees?
16. How do you see your role in the day-to-day business?
17. What specific actions would you desire within the company?
18. Is the owner-manager competent in his job and role in the business? How?
19. Are you happy to work for AMYQ during this period? And why?
20. When did you receive your salary last?
21. Do you have unpaid salary or allowances from AMYQ Ventures Limited?
22. Do you come to work on a daily basis?
23. Thank the employee for participating in the interview and assure him of confidentiality of responses and the need for future interviews if need be.

Appendix E:**Questionnaire for the 360-degree rating of the organisational leadership**

AMYQ Ventures Limited 360-degree Leadership Measurement Questionnaire

Adapted using The Crisis Leader Efficacy in Assessing and Deciding (C-LEAD) Scale (Hadley et al., 2011; Wooten and James, 2010).

Key: True, Undecided, False

1. The leader can anticipate the political and interpersonal ramifications of his decisions and actions.
2. The leader can summarize the key issues involved in a situation to others regardless of how much data is available.
3. The leader can make decisions and recommendations, even when enough information is not provided.
4. The leader can assess how the members of the general public are affected by the organisational crisis being faced.
5. The leader can determine which information is critical to relay to other units in advance of them requesting it.
6. The leader can keep others abreast of compact work activities without over-informing or under-informing them.
7. The leader is able to make decisions and recommendations even under extreme time pressure and during the crisis.
8. The leader can estimate the potential deaths and injuries that may occur as the result of other employees' actions and recommendations.
9. The owner-manager is responsible for the problems being faced by AMYQ Ventures Limited.
10. You have received adequate communication from management concerning the problems.
11. The owner-manager can modify employees' regular work activities instantly to respond to an urgent need and can adapt quickly to changing situations.