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Navigating Uncertainty: Canada's COVID-19 Leadership and a New Model of Gathering, Protecting, Challenging, and Integrating

Christopher Park^{1*}, Michelle Chong¹

1. Department of Management, NUS Business School, National University of Singapore, Singapore.

Abstract

To enhance the effectiveness of leadership, it is vital to understand the kinds of strategies and behaviors that help leaders navigate periods of unpredictability and disorder. This paper explores leadership at Canada's federal level during the COVID-19 pandemic, aiming to establish a new conceptual framework that clarifies how leadership functions and influences outcomes amid instability. The core contribution of this framework lies in identifying behaviors that allow leaders to respond to unforeseen crises across four progressive stages: Collecting, Safeguarding, Confronting, and Unifying. By concentrating on Canada's experience during COVID-19, the study delivers insights that can advance both leadership performance and training.

Keywords: Canadian federal administration, COVID-19, Leadership dynamics, Leadership strategies

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Corresponding author: Christopher Park

E-mail ✉ cpark.management@yahoo.com

Introduction

The global COVID-19 outbreak triggered significant economic instability and social disruption, issues that captured wide public and media attention. Confronted with these challenges, people began to reflect on the necessity of rebuilding systems and envisioning a more resilient future. Consequently, developing an updated and practical model for strategic leadership became a pressing need. The aim of this study is to investigate the particular leadership behaviors that can be employed nationally or organizationally to determine what effective leadership looks like and how it can generate improvement in times of disorder and uncertainty.

To address this question, this study uses a case-based analysis of Canada's federal leadership to evaluate how specific leadership methods and styles shaped the nation's management of the COVID-19 crisis. Through this examination, the paper contributes insights into crisis-oriented leadership and presents lessons that can form the foundation of a strategic leadership model for future unpredictable events. The model emphasizes best practices that not only help alleviate short-term challenges such as economic insecurity and social instability but also promote long-term resilience.

Drawing from Canada's pandemic management strategies, the proposed framework unfolds through four distinct stages: Collecting, Safeguarding, Confronting, and Unifying (parallel to the original stages). The effectiveness of this model is supported by the economic outcomes achieved by the Canadian government within six months (March–September 2020).

Existing literature has extensively discussed what defines an effective leader. Adaptability, confidence, optimism, and concern for staff welfare are often cited as essential qualities [1-3]. According to Yukl [3], empathy, honesty, and sensitivity to others' needs are core contributors to leadership success. Likewise, emotional intelligence, which fosters cooperation and relational understanding, is emphasized by Nahavandi [4] as a determinant of leadership quality.



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In this context, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau exemplifies a people-oriented and inclusive leadership style, promoting trust and teamwork. His vision describes Canada as “a country where everyone has a real and fair chance to succeed” [5], and he emphasizes the need “to make Canada a place where everyone has the opportunities they need to thrive” [5]. His dedication to diversity and freedom and his team-building initiatives are reflected when “he worked closely with his team to build a plan to create jobs, grow the economy, protect the environment, and strengthen the middle class” [5].

Canada was chosen as the subject of analysis because its response to the pandemic displayed notable effectiveness compared to many other nations. As Wilson [6] observed, weak leadership at the early stage of the pandemic accelerated the crisis globally:

“US President Donald Trump, unsurprisingly, continues almost daily to set new lows for reckless incompetence amongst world leaders ... he is not alone in failing to act as a responsible leader should. Severe missteps have also been reported in the approaches taken by Boris Johnson in the UK ... Shinzo Abe in Japan ... Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil.” (p. 280)

The study

This investigation represents a piece of applied research that integrates qualitative and quantitative evidence to analyze how Canada’s national leadership perspective influenced citizens during the COVID-19 pandemic. The project uses a mixed-methods design, beginning with a qualitative case component based largely on direct quotations from Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, reflecting his attitudes, leadership choices, emotions, and reflections. The qualitative information was compiled from government records and media coverage describing official actions and initiatives undertaken throughout the crisis.

As Sharan and Tisdell [7] note, the qualitative process involves “asking, watching, and reviewing” (p. 105); these activities guided the collection and interpretation of material in this study. The qualitative stage focused on extracting meaning and context from Trudeau’s behavior and communications. Quantitative analysis was then added to outline economic tendencies and to illustrate the impact of implemented leadership strategies over a six-month interval, March–September 2020. Together, these methods address the core question of how leadership takes shape and how it produces change during prolonged instability and uncertainty.

Discussion: Canada’s leadership approach to the COVID-19 crisis

Developing a new strategic leadership framework requires examining an authentic example of how strategic thinking guided crisis management. The following section first introduces the conceptual model and then discusses its stages, comparing each with Canada’s conduct during the pandemic to pinpoint the leadership practices that best promote progress and learning.

The suggested model unfolds in four interrelated stages — Gathering, Protecting, Challenging, and Integrating (**Figure 1**). Every phase emphasizes a distinctive set of leadership behaviors that collectively strengthen communities and organizations. Together, the stages depict how strategic leadership progressively transforms difficult circumstances. The paragraphs below describe each phase, highlighting the guiding methods and attitudes demonstrated by Prime Minister Trudeau and his team.

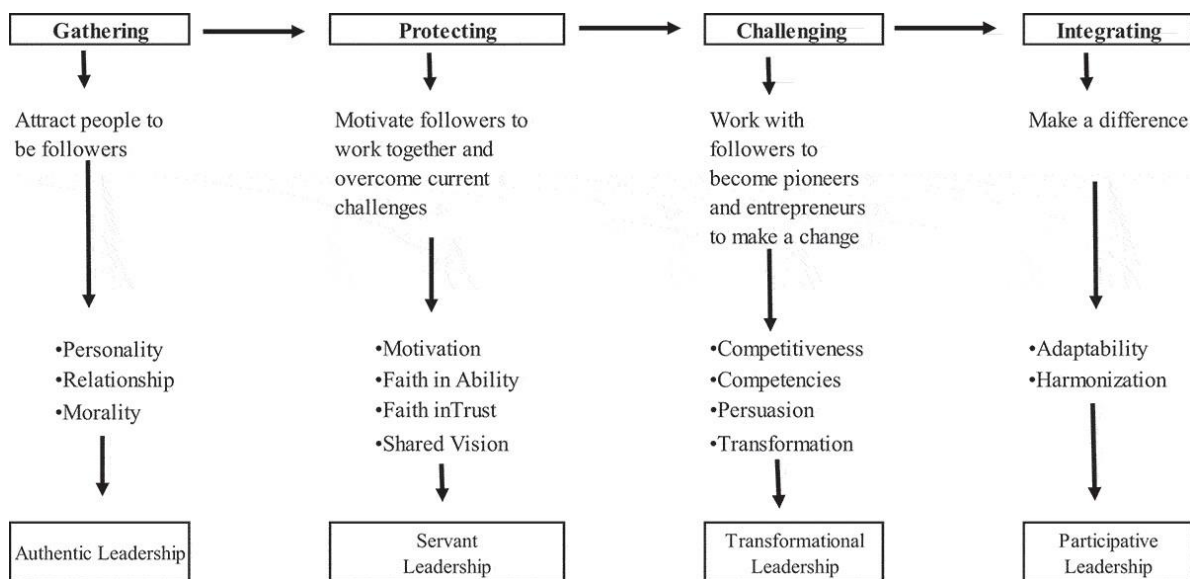


Figure 1. An updated conceptual framework for strategic leadership

First stage: Gathering

The Gathering phase initiates the process of advancement and renewal. It demands that leaders act from moral integrity and reliability, demonstrating values that attract public confidence. At this point, ethical consistency and a sincere character encourage followers to unite around shared direction. Establishing transparent and trustworthy communication is vital, since

collective effort depends on alignment between the leader and the followers. Gathering thus represents a deliberate leadership objective: no enterprise can progress without cohesion and commitment.

An authentic leadership orientation is central to this step because it encourages people to rally around mutual beliefs. According to Landes [8], authentic leaders “bring people together around a shared purpose and a common set of values and motivate them to create value for everyone involved.” Hunt [9] further links authenticity to morality, describing it as a practice centered on openness, ethical consistency, and respect for others—principles that translate ideals into behavior.

Ethical awareness forms the basis for constructive change. Northouse [10] underscores that ethical responsibility is inseparable from genuine leadership. Hunt [9] adds that moral action involves fairness, modesty, gratitude, respect, community welfare, and commitment to enduring benefit. Likewise, Brown and Treviño [11] portray ethical leaders as credible role models — honest, compassionate, and principled — who influence others through integrity. Consequently, within the Gathering phase, authenticity enables followers to discern a leader’s character, intentions, and purpose.

In Canada’s experience, this phase was distinctly visible. Prime Minister Trudeau displayed humility and recognition through inclusive gestures. On July 20, 2020, he addressed members of a Canadian racial and faith community, stating:

“Today, Muslims in Canada and around the world ... celebrate Eid al-Adha. ... Today, we recognize that service and the many contributions that Muslim Canadians have made, and continue to make, to our communities and to our country” [12].

He continued by emphasizing shared civic duty:

“The values at the heart of Eid al-Adha have never been more important. Whether it is supporting a local charity, being there for neighbours, or helping those who are more vulnerable, Muslim Canadians continue to show us what it means to serve our community.” [12].

Through these acknowledgements, Trudeau embodied the essence of authentic leadership—gathering people through trust, respect, and collective purpose.

The Prime Minister demonstrated deep admiration and gratitude during his 2015 meeting with refugees in Canada, remarking, “Years from now, Canadians will remember with immense pride the impact Syrian refugees have had and how they helped improve our nation” [13].

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Justin Trudeau exemplified a leadership approach grounded in integrity and social responsibility. His actions reflected a commitment to collective welfare, turning societal improvement into a shared national priority. He supported raising the provincial minimum wage and established three ministries — the Ministry of Middle Class Prosperity, the Ministry of Seniors, and the Ministry of Families, Children, and Social Development. These new departments collaborated with other agencies, such as Justice and Finance, on initiatives including homeownership support, tax reductions for the middle class, a nationwide pharmacare framework, and programs enhancing Canadians’ financial education [14].

Research consistently links authentic leadership with strong performance outcomes. Landes [8] observed that when leaders act in line with moral convictions, they encourage similar conduct among followers, improving overall performance. Likewise, Brown and Treviño [11] note that individuals “will pay attention to ethical leaders’ modeled behavior” (p. 597). Within the Gathering stage, authenticity helps rebuild public confidence and readiness to face emerging difficulties. This was visible in Canada when Trudeau led by example during the pandemic, working remotely and declaring on March 27, 2020, “We are asking Canadians to work from home wherever possible, we’re asking people to stay self-isolated as much as possible, to not go out if not necessary. And I am happy to continue to do this” [15]. He conducted policy announcements from outside his residence, with all intergovernmental meetings handled via video or phone.

As economic and social struggles mirror each other worldwide, leadership now requires uniting people around a shared purpose and cooperative culture. Effective leaders must build trust, foster teamwork, and guide collective problem-solving with persistence and decisiveness, encouraging public belief in their vision.

Second stage: Protecting

The Protecting stage highlights how leaders guide and uplift people in times of difficulty. It emphasizes service to community needs — particularly stability and prosperity — while fostering ethics, compassion, and unity. This stage embodies the concept of servant leadership, where leaders prioritize moral conduct and the welfare of others. Andersen [16] described servant leaders as those who uphold moral integrity, while Hunt [9] emphasized that this approach is built on compassion, empowerment, and mutual respect. Nathan *et al.* [17] stated that servant leaders “develop followers on the basis of leaders’ altruistic and ethical orientations” (p. 111), aiming to enhance personal growth and collective well-being.

This leadership form was clearly evident in Canada’s pandemic response. Prime Minister Trudeau introduced the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB), a program designed to assist individuals who lost work or income during lockdowns [18]. His servant-leadership mindset was reflected in providing \$500 weekly for 28 weeks, ensuring citizens’ financial security. Reinforcing national unity, Trudeau stated, “We’re not looking at punishing people who made honest mistakes [in applying for CERB], obviously. This is a time for us to pull together as a country” [19].

According to Northouse [10], servant leadership nurtures commitment and motivation by supporting both personal and professional development. Such leaders balance results-focused and people-centered roles, ensuring productivity while

fostering morale. Trudeau embodied both, emphasizing steady governance and compassion. On March 25, 2020, he assured Canadians:

“If you lost your job because of COVID-19, whether you are full-time, contract, or self-employed, this new benefit will be there for you. If you are sick or quarantined, looking after someone sick, or at home taking care of your kids, it is there for you. And even if you are still employed but not receiving income because of this crisis, the CERB is there for you” [18].

Trudeau also underscored his dedication to inclusion and the protection of marginalized groups, asserting,

“Throughout the global COVID-19 pandemic, we have seen firsthand how critical the work of immigrants is to our country, especially in our health and long-term care systems. As we make every effort to ensure a robust economic recovery and protect Canadians’ health and safety, the Government of Canada will continue to welcome newcomers through immigration and refugee resettlement ... we must also find ways to continue to protect refugees fleeing war or violence, and those persecuted for their faith, political affiliation, or sexual orientation” [20].

Servant-oriented leadership emphasizes enhancing motivation, responsibility, and collective welfare. This approach was evident when Prime Minister Trudeau remarked that “as a country, we opened our arms and our hearts to people and families fleeing conflict, insecurity, and persecution ... the Government of Canada will continue to provide humanitarian support and international protection for people fleeing Syria, as well as assist them through resettlement” [20].

Within the Protecting phase, servant leaders demonstrate professional competence and practical insight while responding to complex circumstances. Trudeau frequently consulted scientific and policy specialists to refine national strategies, explaining that “we have taken some very strong measures, and we are not taking anything off the table. We are looking daily at next steps that we might take, or we should not take, and those conversations continue” (Aiello, 2020i, para. 3).

This stage also reflects values such as moral conviction, persistence, and loyalty. According to Nathan *et al.* (2019), spiritual understanding often strengthens a servant leader’s influence. At the onset of COVID-19, Trudeau encouraged Canadians to act responsibly and courageously by maintaining physical distance and reassured the public that financial assistance for families and workers was forthcoming [21]. His conduct illustrates that “a servant leader creates transforming effects on their followers, changing followers’ mindsets and behaviors” [17].

Third stage: Challenging

The Challenging phase concerns how leaders cultivate awareness, originality, and competitiveness among their followers. The objective is to inspire individuals to become proactive innovators capable of confronting both immediate and long-term issues. For example, the Canadian government allocated approximately \$192 million to support national research toward developing a COVID-19 vaccine [22]. Similarly, Jim Balsillie, chair of the Council of Canadian Innovators, advised the government to retain home-grown expertise, arguing that “the closure of the Canada-U.S. border, for instance, should spur the government to create a program to put Canadian innovation students to work domestically, with many having seen their co-op placements in Silicon Valley evaporate” [23].

This phase corresponds closely with transformational leadership, which promotes confidence, interdependence, and creativity. As Siangchokyoo *et al.* [24] noted, transformational leaders play a central role in shaping their followers’ development. Trudeau applied this philosophy when urging universities, laboratories, and private firms to collaborate in finding a long-term solution, declaring, “we need all hands on deck” [22]. Such leadership motivates individuals to perform beyond standard expectations [25] and heightens ethical awareness [3]. Trudeau reinforced this ethical standpoint when warning that “if you choose to ignore that advice you are not just putting yourself at risk, you are putting others at risk” [22]. The Challenging stage, therefore, focuses on raising public consciousness, maintaining order, and encouraging responsible innovation in crisis management.

This level also requires understanding domestic and global pressures to design strategies addressing social and economic disruption. Trudeau urged financial institutions to reduce credit-card interest rates to ease burdens during the pandemic [26]. His government directed billions of dollars toward businesses, farms, and displaced workers [27]. Additional measures aided students and part-time employees working under ten hours per week who were not eligible for CERB [27]. In response to mental-health strains, the administration introduced “a free national app that Canadians can download and connect with mental health services directly” [22]. Altogether, the Challenging stage strengthens creativity, skill growth, and information sharing—capacities essential for adapting to unpredictable global crises.

Fourth stage: Integrating

The Integrating phase emphasizes implementing systemic changes to improve conditions across both national and organizational levels. This stage prioritizes collaboration and collective responsibility, as reflected in Trudeau’s message to Canadians: “I want you to remember that we will get through this, together” [28]. At this level, leadership practices such as adaptability, knowledge sharing, and coordination are crucial. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Trudeau highlighted the need for rapid domestic production of medical equipment: “the entire world was unprepared to have enough

protective equipment, and the only option Canada has right now is to produce as many supplies as quickly as possible” [29]. Agreements with Canadian manufacturers were executed to address these shortages.

The Integrating stage also involves encouraging Canadians to heed expert guidance for a quicker recovery. Trudeau noted, “If Canadians stay home as much as possible, are vigilant with their physical distancing, and wash their hands, this will be the first and worst phase that we go through as a country” [30]. Additionally, participative leadership behaviors—including active involvement, flexibility, and coordination—are critical. Trudeau demonstrated involvement when he recognized public servants’ efforts in processing CERB applications:

“We do not need a pandemic or a special day to recognize your essential contributions to this country, but I hope all Canadians will join me in expressing our deepest gratitude ... to thank the public service that has been working around the clock to process these [CERB] claims.” [29].

Flexibility was evident when Trudeau acknowledged the long-term changes necessitated by the pandemic:

“If we want life to get back to the way it was exactly before, it won’t. ... There will be differences, even a few years from now, that we will have learned from dealing with this global pandemic that I think will be important lessons.” [31].

Coordination was highlighted during Trudeau’s participation in a global summit, where he committed \$850 million to COVID-19 vaccine and treatment research. He emphasized,

“In the fight against COVID-19, our first focus will always be here at home, but this is a global challenge. To keep Canadians safe and restart our economy, we need to defeat this virus not just within our borders, but wherever it is found.” [32].

Trudeau reinforced a global perspective, stating: “As a global community, we must work together to make sure that people around the world have access to vaccinations—especially the most vulnerable” [33].

Results and Discussion

This section summarizes the economic outcomes achieved by the Canadian government over a six-month period, March–September 2020, providing an evaluation of the proposed leadership model and its four stages. Each stage—Gathering, Protecting, Challenging, and Integrating—represents distinct leadership practices that contributed to social and economic stabilization. The stages collectively involved practices such as mobilizing citizens, fostering motivation, promoting innovation, and driving measurable improvements.

The case of Canada demonstrates a progressive application of authentic, servant, transformational, and participative leadership styles throughout the pandemic. Implementing these four stages enabled support for citizens while minimizing social and economic harm.

During the early months of the pandemic, Canada experienced significant economic disruption. From March to May 2020, “the Canadian economy has about lost three million jobs, according to Statistics Canada, while millions of other Canadians have seen their incomes drastically reduced as a result of nearly all non-essential businesses being closed” [34]. Nevertheless, the sequential adoption of the four leadership stages helped mitigate further losses and promote recovery. Table 1 presents a summary of the resulting economic indicators.

Table 1. Economic Indicators for Canada, March–September 2020

Economic indicator	March	April	May	June	July	August	September
GDP	-7.30	-11.60	4.80	6.50	3.10	1.20	0.80
Unemployment (%)	7.80	13	13.70	12.30	10.90	10.20	9
Retail Trade (%)	-10	-25	19	26	1	0	2
Employment (x 1,000)	18178.7	16184.9	16474.5	17427.4	17845.9	18091.7	18469.9
Jobs (x1,000)		-1993.8	289.6	952.9	418.5	245.8	378.2

Note. Adapted from Gross domestic product (GDP) at basic prices, by industry, monthly, growth rates (x 1,000,000); Labour force characteristics by province, monthly, seasonally adjusted; Retail trade sales by industry (x 1,000), Statistics Canada [35-38]

During 2020, Canada’s unemployment rate declined from 13% in April to 9% by September (Statistics Canada [35]; **Figure 2**).



Figure 2. Canada’s unemployment rate, 2020

=Note. Based on Table 14–10-0287-03: Labour force characteristics by province, monthly, seasonally adjusted [Custom dataset], Statistics Canada [37]

The labour market also rebounded, adding hundreds of thousands of new positions over several months [39] Specifically, 952,900 jobs were added in June, followed by 418,500 in July, 245,800 in August, and 378,200 in September (Statistics Canada [36] **Figure 3**).

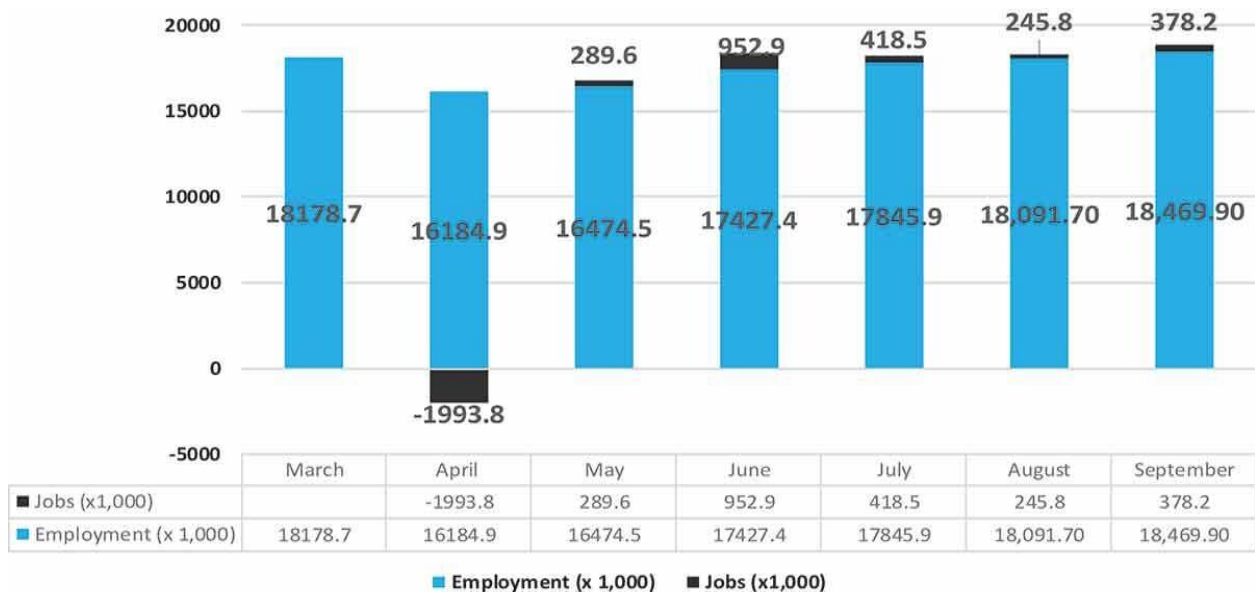


Figure 3. Canada’s employment growth in 2020

Note. Adapted from Table 14–10-0287-03: Labour force characteristics by province, monthly, seasonally adjusted [Customized data], Statistics Canada [36]

Retail trade also showed a strong rebound, increasing by roughly 19% in May and 26% in June (Statistics Canada [35]; **Figure 4**).

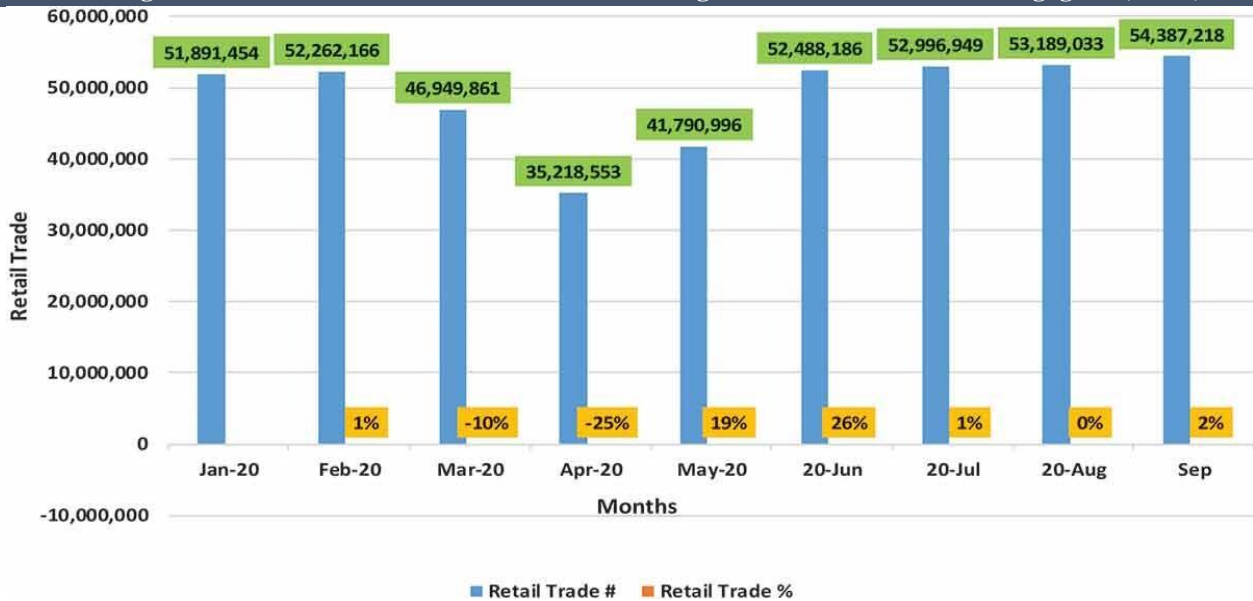


Figure 4. Canada’s retail trade recovery, 2020

Note. Derived from Table 20–10-0008-02: Retail trade sales by industry (x 1,000), Statistics Canada [35]

Similarly, the GDP rose by 4.8% in May, 6.5% in June, and 3.1% in July (Statistics Canada [38]; **Figure 5**), reflecting gradual economic recovery.

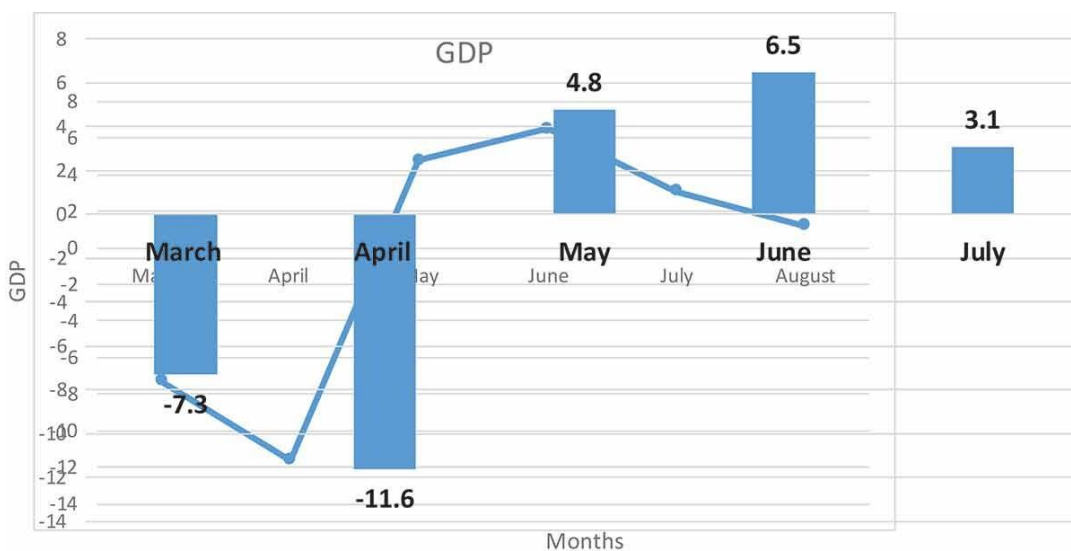


Figure 5. Monthly GDP growth rate, Canada 2020

Note. Taken from Table 36–10-0434-02: Gross domestic product (GDP) at basic prices, by industry, monthly, growth rates (x 1,000,000), Statistics Canada [38]

Conclusion

Canada operates under three tiers of government—federal, provincial, and municipal—each bearing distinct duties. Provincial authorities possess the power to make decisions influencing their respective provinces, whereas municipal governments oversee the delivery of services that directly affect particular cities or towns. This case study examined the leadership style and actions of Canada’s federal government, as it holds the authority to implement programs and policies that impact the nation as a whole. The study explored Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s leadership strategies and conduct during the COVID-19 pandemic. At the time of analysis, Trudeau and his administration demonstrated a clear commitment to creating a unified objective: reducing the crisis’s negative impacts and establishing supportive programs for citizens. These coordinated efforts foster public confidence and strengthen trust in national leadership. The strategic leadership model derived from this case aims to offer adaptable insights for leaders in various organizational and community contexts worldwide.

The main purpose of this research was to analyze the leadership methods used during the 2020 COVID-19 crisis that could serve as the basis for a new strategic leadership framework. To achieve this, the investigation concentrated on Canada’s federal-level governance, with an emphasis on Trudeau’s leadership patterns. Thus, the proposed model stems directly from Canada’s federal response to the pandemic, addressing the question of what effective leadership entails and how it can

influence outcomes amid economic disruption and social instability. The model presented here is built on leadership behaviours and approaches that significantly contributed to resilience and adaptability during a national emergency. It is proposed that the framework can be applied not only to national governance but also to organizational environments facing unforeseen challenges. The model can enhance both performance and overall success. It is composed of four interrelated stages—Gathering, Protecting, Challenging, and Integrating—each guiding leadership decisions in both turbulent and steady contexts. According to the model, effective leaders should sequentially demonstrate authentic, servant, transformational, and participative leadership traits, as these styles are closely associated with organizational outcomes. Initially, leaders must inspire and align people with a shared vision, philosophy, and strategic intent. Next, they should invest in personal growth, cultivate a culture of trust and ethical care, and emphasize teamwork. In the third phase, leaders are encouraged to foster innovation, promote synergy, and strengthen self-leadership and confidence among their teams. Lastly, leaders are expected to enhance outcomes through knowledge exchange, collaboration, and shared experience. Leaders in organizations continually seek methods to remain competitive and resilient in unpredictable conditions. They can start by adopting the four-stage model introduced in this study. However, there remains a need for further empirical testing to evaluate its validity and effectiveness. Future leadership research can explore and refine this model to improve performance both organizationally and nationally.

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