

**Collective Response to the Pandemic: Activating Organizational Learning Through Collective Intelligence**

### **Abstract**

This paper aims to shed light on the role of collective intelligence in activating adaptive and collaborative leadership practices at Japanese academic institutions in response to the global pandemic. It draws on the personal experiences of the author and faculty members from seven Japanese universities to explore the way collective intelligence activated an adaptive response to adversity and triggered organization-wide learning during the global pandemic.

*Keywords:* adaptive leadership, change, collective intelligence, hierarchy, pandemic crisis

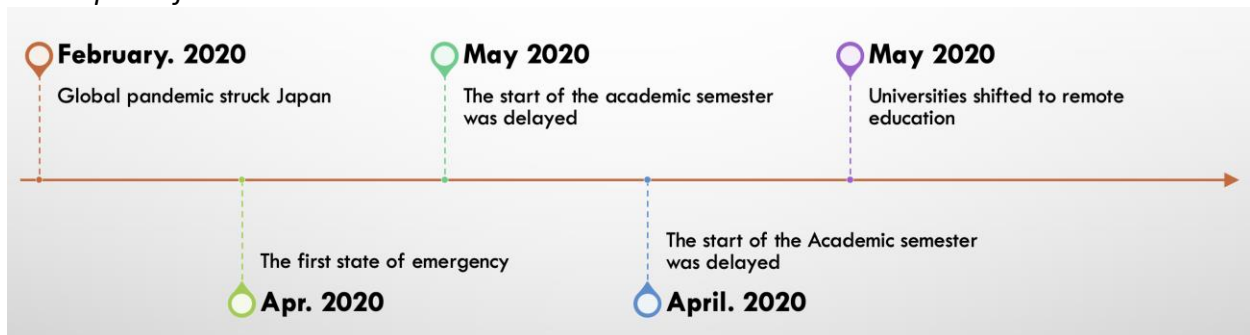
## Collective Response to the Pandemic: Activating Organizational Learning Through Collective Intelligence

2020 was an unprecedented year for the increasingly internationalized academic institutions worldwide. Due to the pandemic, many universities from around the world moved all classes online for the foreseeable future. Inevitably, Japanese universities also followed suit. The sudden shift to remote education brought technical and logistical challenges to teaching and classroom management. Both teachers and students struggled to meet the demands of the new online learning environment (Aristovnik et al., 2020).

One of the challenges was a lack of technical knowledge of online class management. Although most Japanese universities had established their online learning platforms such as *Manaba*, *Blackboard*, *Moodle*, and *Google Classroom*, long before the global pandemic, most teachers were not ready to move away from their traditional teaching methods. As a result, students were also deprived of opportunities to get accustomed to technology integrated education. Therefore, when universities suddenly made the decision to move all classes online, both teachers and students were caught off guard. However, despite these daunting challenges, Japanese academic institutions successfully managed to adapt to virtual teaching and learning, which has been on-going over the past year and a half.

**Figure 1**

*The Impact of Global Pandemic*



*Note.* The chart above shows the timeline from the start of the global pandemic and how it led to online learning.

### Response to Adversity

One of the key characteristics of Japanese organizations is that they prioritize the harmony of the group over individual expression. Members will conform to the norms and values of a group, making concessions to maintain harmony. Hierarchy, homogeneity, and an emphasis on group needs over those of individuals are ingrained in Japanese organizational culture, reflected in daily operations (Egitim, 2022). When faced with adversity, members' strong commitment to the group's collective identity helps them unify around a need for action (Heifetz & Linsky, 2017).

Their commitment to collective values did not only help them overcome past natural disasters but also offered them valuable lessons. This was particularly evident when the 2011 Fukushima disaster occurred in Japan. Prime minister Naoto Kan paid a visit to the crippled Fukushima nuclear reactor. Despite his science background in applied physics, he was not the

one who made the critical decisions on the disaster site. Instead, specialized nuclear engineers made all the critical decisions and risked their lives to prevent the radioactive waste leakage into the human environment. This leadership approach to crisis management provides insights into how collective intelligence is utilized in crises (Hibiya, 2013).

### Universities' Response to the Crisis

As hierarchical boundaries vanished, resistance to change was gradually dissolved due to the group's commitment to the collective values, collective intelligence emerged during the crisis (Egitim, 2021). Firstly, university personnel, faculty members, alumni as well as other donors made donations to universities immediately following the shift to virtual classrooms. This collective financial aid allowed many Japanese universities to provide technical and logistical support to students and enhance their participation in virtual classes. The Japanese government also offered universities financial aid to upgrade their broadband services and equipment.

In many universities, communication channels were established to allow teachers to share instructional videos, online teaching methods, tools, and materials both in English and Japanese. International faculty members also stepped into leadership roles to offer their knowledge and expertise on how to utilize computer-assisted language learning effectively. This also helped overcome the language barrier for non-Japanese faculty members. Through these communication channels, English translations of important documents and materials were shared with non-Japanese faculty members. In addition, various teaching materials and techniques were shared between part-time, full-time contract, and tenured faculty members through these communication channels. This adaptive and collaborative process helped empower individuals and motivated them to take new initiatives, regardless of their status in their respective departments. As the faculty and administrative personnel became better equipped, students also benefitted from the organization-wide learning.

**Figure 2**

*How did Universities Overcome the Pandemic?*



*Note.* The above figure shows the strategies used by Japanese universities to harness collective intelligence.

### Conclusion

Japanese universities' response to the global pandemic crisis was a valuable illustration of how collective intelligence was utilized to promote adaptive and collaborative leadership in

academic organizations. Leadership recognized the adaptive challenges, utilized a propensity toward collective intelligence to harness the knowledge and skills of individuals, which then triggered organizational learning. The swift adaptation of Japanese universities in dealing with a major crisis sets an interesting precedent for other organizations around the world.

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