

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Cabin Crew Leadership Styles During COVID-19: A Case of Thailand

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**Abstract:** The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted the airline industry, causing a sharp decline in international air travel. To survive, airlines quickly adopted cost-cutting strategies, including human resource retrenchments. These job losses created widespread job insecurity, leading to negative consequences such as depression, lower motivation, job dissatisfaction, and a decline in overall productivity among cabin crews. During a crisis, leadership becomes a strategic tool for maintaining employee performance, as leadership styles play a key role in reducing job stress and anxiety among subordinates. Although studies on crisis leadership in tourism and hospitality are somewhat prevalent, little attention has been paid to the airline industry, a subsegment of the tourism sector. To address this research gap, this study aims to investigate leadership styles that help cabin crews cope with the stress and anxiety caused by job insecurity during COVID-19 and sustain their performance throughout the crisis. A qualitative research method involved in-depth, open-ended interviews with 20 cabin crew members in Thailand. Findings deriving from the thematic and narrative analysis of the interviews revealed that ideal leaders should possess characteristics such as being good listeners, empathetic, composed, and effective communicators. These leadership qualities help reduce stress and anxiety during flight operations and enhance team productivity. By employing the contingency theory of leadership as a theoretical framework, this study contributes to the literature on specific leadership styles during crises within the tourism-related industry.

**Keywords:** Cabin crew, Leadership style, Crisis management, COVID-19, Airline business, Thailand

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected many tourism-related industries, including the airline business (Chutipongdech et al., 2023). In 2020 and 2021, the total worldwide passenger numbers dramatically dropped to 60.1% and 49.0% of the figure in 2019, respectively, while total global passenger

revenue decreased from approximately 372,385 USD million and 364,700 million USD in 2020 and 2021, respectively (International Civil Aviation Organization, 2022). Unavoidably, this decrease was reflected in the reduction in aviation jobs of approximately 2.3 million or 21%. According to the International Air Transport