

## “It takes a lot of sisu to get through it”- managerial experiences of facing adversities during pandemic

Johanna Vuori & Ilmari Määttänen

**To cite this article:** Johanna Vuori & Ilmari Määttänen (2024) “It takes a lot of sisu to get through it”- managerial experiences of facing adversities during pandemic, International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-being, 19:1, 2291242, DOI: [10.1080/17482631.2023.2291242](https://doi.org/10.1080/17482631.2023.2291242)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/17482631.2023.2291242>



© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 06 Dec 2023.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

## “It takes a lot of sisu to get through it”- managerial experiences of facing adversities during pandemic

Johanna Vuori <sup>a</sup> and Ilmari Määttäen<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Research area of entrepreneurship and business transformation, Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences, Helsinki, Finland;

<sup>b</sup>Department of Psychology and Logopedics, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland

### ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** Sisu refers to extraordinary internal strength in the face of adversities. Although originally a Finnish concept, it can be a universally useful concept for studying managerial well-being and performance during difficult or even emergency periods. Previous research on sisu categorizes it into beneficial and harmful sisu and suggests that these two dimensions of sisu are useful when studying determination and resoluteness in crisis situations. This study applies the concept of sisu to examine managers' well-being in times of crisis.

**Methodology:** Interviews were conducted with 15 managers in the hotel, manufacturing and retail industries in Finland.

**Results:** The beneficial effects of sisu seem to dissolve when it is used too often. The study also highlighted the paradoxical tension involved in the decision to stop or continue actions in a difficult situation and contributes to sisu research by discussing collective sisu.

**Conclusion:** The results of this study suggest that beneficial sisu helps to overcome adversity, while harmful sisu causes distortions in thinking that are detrimental to managers. Understanding one's own tendency towards beneficial or harmful sisu in difficult situations can help in managerial work. Collective sisu is an excellent resource for overcoming difficult situations in workplaces.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 4 August 2023  
Accepted 1 December 2023

### KEYWORDS

Sisu; managers; leadership; pandemic; COVID-19

## Introduction



The role of a leader has been recognized as critically important in crisis situations (Pearson & Clair, 1998; Weick, 1993), making the study of managers' work and well-being in times of crisis an important research topic (Williams et al., 2017). Managerial resilience during challenging periods is crucial, as it directly influences managers' abilities to lead their organization's employees and make operationally relevant decisions (Ledesma, 2014).

The global COVID-19 pandemic had profound effects on managerial work (Ansell et al., 2020; Dirani et al., 2020). The pandemic has also threatened managers' well-being (Graf-Vlachy et al., 2020; Li et al., 2022) and tested their resilience (Giousmpasoglou et al., 2021; Lombardi et al., 2021). Research indicates that one in four company directors experienced increased stress during lock-down caused by the pandemic (Dutheil et al., 2022). To be better prepared for possible new major disruptions, it is important to learn from the experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Previous studies demonstrate that managerial well-being, even during normal times, is a complex phenomenon. Research suggests that managerial well-

being is influenced by various organizational factors such as social support, ethical culture, and their position in the organizational hierarchy (see literature review by Herttuala et al., 2020) as well as personal factors such as managerial age (Irehill et al., 2023) or skills (Mencl et al., 2016). Extant research offers contradictory evidence on the question of whether managers experience less stress than non-managers (Li et al., 2018; Skakon et al., 2011). Research on managerial well-being and resilience would not only benefit from further studies (Förster & Duchek, 2022) but also from studies that offer nuanced approaches and in-depth examination of managerial well-being during crisis. New knowledge about managerial well-being is also important when orientating or training managers to face crisis situations in the future.

This study offers an in-depth qualitative perspective to managerial well-being during difficult times. It applies the concept of sisu. Sisu is a concept familiar to all Finns. In every-day language it refers to extraordinary inner strength and resoluteness in the face of adversity. Sisu has recently been operationalized as a two-dimensional research concept. The two dimensions are beneficial and harmful sisu. The difference of these two dimensions is that one can get extra boost

**CONTACT** Johanna Vuori  [johanna.vuori@haaga-helia.fi](mailto:johanna.vuori@haaga-helia.fi)  Research area of entrepreneurship and business transformation, Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences, Ratapihantie 13, Helsinki 00520, Finland

© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

in difficult times with beneficial *sisu*, but can lock oneself into stubbornness with harmful *sisu*. Harmful *sisu* may produce distortions in thinking which cause harm for oneself or other people (Henttonen et al., 2022; Lahti, 2019).

Extant research indicates that beneficial *sisu* can manifest itself in three ways. First, it can be the latent power that emerges in adversity. Second, beneficial *sisu* can be a person's action mindset in a situation that seems hopeless. The third subfactor of beneficial *sisu* is extraordinary perseverance, which transcends one's mental or physical limits (Henttonen et al., 2022; Lahti, 2019). Beneficial *sisu* has several broadly related concepts in the research literature (hardiness, mental toughness, self-efficacy), all of which can be considered to measure personal resilience. The English concept of grit is sometimes translated to Finnish as *sisu* and Finnish *sisu* into English as grit. However, the concept of grit introduced by Duckworth et al. (2007) differs from the *sisu* as it refers to passion to reach a long-term life goal whereas *sisu* refers to extra strength at the moment it is needed. In other words, *sisu* differs from grit as it does imply that a person would have a goal towards which s/he is striving for in the long term. Moreover, the concept of *sisu* does not have the element of passion that is inherent in the concept of grit (Lahti, 2022).

Harmful *sisu*, however, refers to stubbornness to stop and is divided into three separate sub-factors: 1) harm to self, 2) harm to reason and 3) harm to others (Henttonen et al., 2022; Lahti, 2019). There are no other concepts that would closely be related to harmful *sisu*, which in itself makes harmful *sisu* an interesting concept to study. Research indicates that beneficial *sisu* is associated with better well-being, while harmful *sisu* is associated with perceived stress and depressive symptoms. Beneficial and harmful *sisu* are independent of each other: people can have both harmful and beneficial *sisu*, either a lot or a little, or a lot of one and a little of the other (Henttonen et al., 2022; Lahti, 2019).

We argue that the two-dimensional nature of *sisu* can provide new insights when studying managerial well-being in exceptional situations because most other concepts and measures on personal resoluteness and determination imply that more you have that particular personality trait or characteristic the better it is for personal well-being and personal resilience. By using a two-dimensional concept we are able to explore both the advantages and disadvantages of the phenomenon and thus provide a more nuanced perspective. The research question we will discuss in this paper is thus: how do beneficial and harmful *sisu* affect managerial work in challenging times?

We argue that in the research on well-being it is important to use concepts that do not always derive

from the Anglo-American research tradition. Each linguistic and cultural area has its own terminology, which may not be directly translatable into other languages. Resilience-related vocabulary is often copied directly from English. For example, Lomas (2016) describes *sisu* as the original inspiration for an article on 216 well-being-related concepts that are difficult to translate directly into English.

Personal resilience in normal times differs from resilience in times of crisis (Branicki et al., 2019). The pandemic era with its multiple adversaries and extraordinary challenges has created a unique context for examining the well-being of managers through the lens of *sisu*. We have intentionally placed this study in organizational context, where work could not be organized as remote work. The large-scale shift to remote and hybrid work which was accelerated by the global pandemic has arguably been one of the major changes in the world of work and has also required new competencies from management. This has also been in the interest of researchers who have made important discoveries on these new requirements (Sjöblom et al., 2022; van Zoonen et al., 2021). Less attention has been given to work and management that continued in normal workplaces during extraordinary times. Work in these workplace was far from normal. Therefore this study wants to shed light into managerial experiences in shops, factories and hotels during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Materials and methods

A total of 20 managers were interviewed for this study. The sampling strategy for this study was purposeful sampling. We aimed at finding information-rich cases to learn about managerial experiences during the pandemic and wanted to select industries where remote work was not possible and therefore sought participants in manufacturing, retail and hospitality industries. Invitations were sent out to the manufacturing and retail sector by seeking out information-rich cases in manufacturing and retail sectors. Prospective interviewees were identified based on previous interviews or blog posts related to management that had been published either in media or companies' websites. With the exception of one of the researchers' own network contacts, the invitations for interviews in the hotel sector were selected from a list of potential interviewees working in different parts of Finland, provided by a project partner. Approximately 40% of those invited accepted the interview request. The interviewees were asked for permission to record the interview for research purposes and were informed that they had the possibility to stop the interview at any time. They agreed that their interview transcripts would be stored securely and anonymously for the purposes of the study. Ethics

committee approval was not needed for this study because the ethical committee that oversees the research conducted at first author's institution reviews only medical studies and studies with human subjects only if they fulfil specific requirements (e.g., interviewing minors or exposing participants to strong stimuli). This research did not belong to that list of exceptions.

The job titles and gender of the interviewees are shown in [Table I](#).

The interviewees managerial experience ranged from six months to 25 years. Nine of the interviewees worked in the metropolitan area, the other interviewees hold occupations in other parts of Finland, either in cities or on factory sites. Three of these locations were chosen in particular because they had been covered in the media during the pandemic due to the rapid spread of the COVID-19 virus.

With the exception of one face-to-face interview, the interviews were conducted in virtual meetings. Each manager was interviewed once. These lasted on average 50 minutes (minimum 42 minutes, maximum 57 minutes). The interviews were conducted in autumn 2021 when the pandemic had lasted for about 1.5 years. The interview guide was structured around five main themes divided into 37 questions ([Appendix 1](#)). The first four themes were: COVID-19 pandemic in your industry through the eyes of your organization, employee well-being during the pandemic, 3) the well-being of managers during the pandemic, and 4) working life after the pandemic. As the purpose of the research was to understand managers' lived experiences in face of adversaries with *sisu*, the interview themes were chosen to uncover participants' own lived world (Kvale, 2007) during the pandemic. The fifth theme was *sisu*. The interviewees were asked if the *sisu* was part of their vocabulary. If so, the interview continued by asking interviewees

whether they associated *sisu* with their own or their employees' work during the pandemic. If the answer was yes, the interviewed managers were asked to give examples of their experiences with *sisu* during the pandemic.

For the purpose of this article, the data was restricted by excluding from the analysis the five transcripts in which the interviewee did not associate the word *sisu* with own work as a manager. Analysis was continued the remaining 15 interviews. We started the analysis by reading the transcripts several times to get immersed with the data (Burnard, 1991). The coding framework for the deductive analysis was based on the three categories of beneficial and three categories of harmful *sisu* that were described in the introductory part of this paper (Henttonen et al., 2022; Lahti, 2019). The categories of beneficial *sisu* were: 1) latent power that emerges in adversity, 2) action mindset in a situation that seems hopeless, and 3) extraordinary perseverance, which transcends one's mental or physical limit. The categories of harmful *sisu* were 4) harm to self, 5) harm to reasoning, and 6) harm to others.

Lahti's (2019) categories of beneficial *sisu* emerged in the data as three different categories. In contrast, Lahti's (2019) categories of harmful *sisu* did not separate into their own subcategories in the data, and were combined into a single subcategory of harmful *sisu*. [Table II](#) provides sample quotes for main coding categories. The number code given to the interviewed managers is random between 1–20 and does not refer to the order of interviewees listed in [Table I](#).

In addition to coding interview data in the categories explained above the interviewees told about their experiences of *sisu* in a collective sense, in other words the perspective was not the manager but the work community. Therefore we treated this data as a separate, fifth coding category and labelled it as *collective sisu*.

[Table II](#) also describes the pandemic-related situations to which the interviewees' *sisu* experiences related to. The interviewed managers had faced many unprecedented situations during the pandemic. Health security information was incomplete and changed often, masks and gloves were of short supply in the beginning, staff were laid off and hotels had to be closed. Staff shortages could not be anticipated, as illnesses and quarantines came unexpectedly. In addition, there were shortages of supplies, raw materials and components.

## Results

The interviewed managers described how they had often been stretched to the limit during the pandemic. For example, at the beginning of the pandemic, everything new and extra required the

**Table I.** Interviewed managers.

Workplace	title	gender
Hotel	Reception manager	female
Hotel	General manager	male
Hotel	Reception manager	male
Hotel	Restaurant manager	female
Hotel	Hotel manager	female
Hotel	Hotel manager	female
Factory (wood processing industry)	Maintenance manager	female
Construction site	Site manager	female
Factory (chemical industry)	Plant manager	male
Factory (wood processing industry)	Plant manager	female
Factory (metal industry)	Production manager	male
Construction company	Managing director	male
Factory (food industry)	Production director	male
Specialty store	Shopkeeper	female
Specialty store	Service manager	male
Specialty store	Store manager	male
Grocery store	Store manager	female
Department store	Department store manager	female
Grocery store	Shopkeeper	female
Grocery store	Shopkeeper	female

**Table II.** Categories of beneficial and harmful *sisu*, key quotes and examples of pandemic-related situations.

Category	Key quotes	Situations
Latent power that emerges in adversity	In many occasions I just survive just by taking a sort of lever out of the air. (Manager 11) ... all these layoffs and redundancies and so on, even though they have been hard, but somehow you are still find the last bit of strength from somewhere. (Manager 7)	Staff shortage Layoffs
Action mindset in a situation that seems hopeless	I remember when I had 75 calls in one day plus all the emails and WhatsApp messages and such to get through that [high season day] and get the people quarantined. I was still worried, of course, because at that point there was no information, of course, about what the corona was really like, and naturally I was worried about who was ill there and what their condition was. (Manager 14) It also takes the courage to say that I will do this, even if everything else has gone wrong today or even if we haven't got an employee here to help. Or even if the refrigerator broke or a customer snapped at me. (Manager 15)	Arrangements for workers in the event of sickness and quarantine Staff shortage Need for new solutions (e.g., setting up an online shop)
Extraordinary perseverance which transcends one's mental or physical limit	They [the workers] were quarantined at the same time that my youngest child had a corona exposure at day care, so I was working remotely. Then there was this situation here [in the factory]. And then in the evenings and mornings we went through the staff lists and looked at how to get people to replace them, and yes, it was a tough time. (Manager 5) We brought people together and made it very clear right at the beginning and said that this is the situation now, and that we have no alternative. Our work cannot be done remotely. This country is in lock-down. It is up to us to ensure that the Finns will get food. And then perhaps this attitude gave rise to a certain kind of will to fight, that there is no one else but us. (Manager 15)	The customer demand is higher than current staff can cope with The manager carries out the work of his/her subordinates in addition to his/her own work Arrangements for workers in the event of sickness and quarantine
Harmful <i>sisu</i>	... it was quite a show, I myself worked around the clock every day for probably two or three months, so I was pretty exhausted by the time we got the summer workers to work. (Manager 12) It was a really tough summer for us. It was such an inexpensive campaign that it worked and brought us a lot more customers than we might have thought. And then, indeed, when we are quite a small group of people so those who have been at work so is quite tired mentally and then physically both. (Manager 10)	The customer demand is higher than current staff can cope with The manager carries out the work of his/her subordinates in addition to his/her own work

managers to make arrangements that could not be made during normal working hours. The workload of the managers was also affected by the fact that companies had to lay off some of their employees, which meant that the managers had to do their work alongside their own. Some managers were for the first time in a position of giving notices.

... when it came to laying everybody off and taking care of it and then the last thing you get is your own layoff notice. Well, it takes a lot of *sisu* to get through it and stay strong. And yet, we are in fact always on the side of the employer. No matter how hard and unpleasant and unfair it may seem, we are still in the position of supervisor, representing the employer. (Manager 7)

Some managers were also partially laid off, but the reduction in their workload was not proportionate. The managers also had to work overtime when they had to substitute for their workers who had to take sick leave or were quarantined because of the pandemic. One of the interviewed managers described her experience of managing a grocery store when 75% of employees were quarantined: "You either die and cry, or move on" (Manager 15).

It is noteworthy that *sisu* experiences were not linked with to the implementation of health security measures during the pandemic. Although the

managers did talk about how they had to wait for safety instructions and eventually received them one by one, the practical challenges were solved rationally.

In the next stage of analysis, the aim was to find broader and richer themes in the data that shed light on the phenomenon under investigation (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Vaismoradi & Snelgrove, 2019). These themes are discussed below. The first theme is the fluid boundary between beneficial and harmful *sisu* in a tough situation. The second theme is the manager's assessment of when to continue or whether the situation is hopeless and one should stop. The third theme discussed is collective *sisu*.

## Themes

### *The fine line between beneficial and harmful sisu*

This study brings a different perspective to the concepts of harmful and beneficial *sisu*, as in the data the beneficial *sisu* of the managers seems to turn stealthily into harmful *sisu* when it is needed too often. *Sisu* have been used when it is thought that the situation calls for it, but at the same time it is believed that the situation is temporary and will get better.



... yes, perseverance and *sisu* have been required. Sort of teeth grinding and going forward. And particularly having the idea that now everything is temporary. (Manager 6)

I kind of worked non-stop, I had to do it with sort of *sisu*. I did not always like it, but I had to go and I had to do it. And it was a bit like grinding my teeth and maybe just with *sisu* that I'll just do it now, and this does not last forever. (Manager 12)

Lahti (2019) compares *sisu* to a spare can of petrol. It is available but even the spare can will be empty one day if it has been used often. During the pandemic, the hopes of the managers for the pandemic to be over soon were dashed time and time again. In the worst cases, the prolonged situation had led to a collapse in the manager's own well-being.

There was always something. The phone was always ringing. We were on a summer holiday trip, and when the others went to the pool, I had my laptop and I stayed in the room to work. At that moment I realized that this is not worth it. This is no longer the reason I wanted to do this work. Now I feel like nothing really feels like anything anymore. (Manager 15)

Yes, now this has reached the point that somehow, I have endured this all the time with an optimistic thought that this will soon get easier. And when it has not, now you notice that this shopkeeper is fatigued. For now. (Manager 17)

Another reason that emerges from the data that beneficial *sisu* can turn into harmful *sisu* is related to the lack of appreciation or support from one's own superior. This has a negative impact on the well-being of the manager.

The managers ... were left quite alone with an impossible task in the sense that we had to deal with our own managerial work looking after the well-being of the staff and performing the administrative duties. At the same time, we had to make profitable sales and work alone on operational tasks. This equation has been an extremely bad experience for me during the last year. Our professionalism and therefore our appreciation was crushed down really strongly during the pandemic. (Manager 9)

... because you know that you are the one who is responsible for it and you are the one who always stretches and stays put and is so that you always have to keep going ... I would have needed, and all the managers here would have needed more support from senior management onsite. That yes, if you think about it, if you've been in the company for a long time, I've probably never thought about changing to a different sector so many times as I have in the last year. (Manager 6)

### *Where is the limit of perseverance?*

Another theme that emerges from the data concerns the situation where the manager has to decide whether to give up or continue in a hopeless

situation. The following quotes from the data illustrate the difficulty of the situation.

Somehow, I think that if you don't have any *sisu*, then you give up pretty easily, you don't complete what you were up to. You know, it's really exciting. In fact, where are the boundaries, what is passion and what is *sisu* or perseverance? A little bit of it is always a feeling of biting my teeth. (Manager 12)

... that you expect a lot from yourself, and that you set yourself too many goals and therefore too many expectations. So it could be just that, if you had such an expectation, that you are expected to have *sisu*. It can be detrimental. Just like, if it is just said that now you just have to keep going, this is the situation, let's go. What if the person doesn't feel like he is able to continue? (Manager 7)

Lahti (2019) defines that one of the characteristics of beneficial *sisu* is perseverance that transcends previous physical and mental limits. A quote in her article describes the category as "Sisu is never giving up, fighting until the end and then beyond" (Lahti, 2019, p. 66). Many pre-pandemic experiences in the data can thus be classified as perseverance that transcends previous mental or physical limits. As a result of the pandemic, managers found themselves in situations where their basic task of keeping a shop or hotel open or a factory running at a commercially viable level could at any moment become hopeless, especially due to absenteeism or lay-offs caused by the pandemic. One of the managers in retail (Manager 14) had managed to occupy the shop with her decisive and rapid action, even though 80% of the workers were either sick with corona or quarantined due to exposure. The production manager interviewed for the study (Manager 5), on the other hand, reported that he had been able to double production capacity in a short time by temporarily organizing the factory's operations so that it could respond quickly to the peak in consumer demand caused by the pandemic.

But when does persistence become counterproductive and one should give up? Previous research on *sisu* (Henttonen et al., 2022; Lahti, 2019) suggests that a key feature of harmful *sisu* is the inability to give up in time. However, the inability to quit in time is conceptually and practically contradictory to the above-mentioned category of perseverance that transcends mental or physical limits.

There is a tension between the two options, which may have been influenced by the expectations of the manager about him/herself or the environment. In line with previous research on *sisu* (Henttonen et al., 2022), an explanation for resolving the tension could be found in the amount of beneficial and harmful *sisu* each person has. If a person has too much harmful *sisu*, it is difficult to quit.

Beneficial *sisu* can help maintain focus and rational thinking. For example, people with high levels of

beneficial *sisu* may be less likely to get bogged down in problems and spend less time pursuing unnecessary things. The examples below illustrate how managers are able to focus on the essentials of their task.

I was working hard with the online store, as I thought that it would not last long and be temporary. So I thought I can manage this with our own staff. I did deliveries and collected items. But then at some point it seemed that no, no, no, what are we going to do? Then we put our heads together a temporary employment agency that provides restaurant workers. There were a lot of people of course without work, so X people came then from there to record orders. (Manager 17)

Well, just last week, when we had four sick leaves for one evening, it was a bit like, I'll come and I'll help, but I can't replace these four. So don't think that I could suddenly jump into the shoes of four people, that I'm not a rainmaker, even though I'm your boss. (Manager 11)

Beneficial *sisu* also gives strength to say no to unrealistic expectations from outside, like the manager in the example above.

### Collective *sisu*

This study brings a new contribution to the study of *sisu* through the notion of collective *sisu*. Collective *sisu* was seen in the data as beneficial support that helped the whole work community to cope with exceptional circumstances.

... we have, probably to a certain extent the whole company has had courage and put up the fight, have *sisu* to get through this together. (Manager 4)

However, it can't be like the only person pulling the pile of stones is the manager. There has to be a whole crew pulling the pile of stones to make it move. It doesn't help if the one person has *sisu*, but the whole gang has to have *sisu*. (Manager 14)

Among the categories of beneficial *sisu*, descriptions of collective *sisu* are close to the category of *latent power generated by challenge*. However, the perspective in collective *sisu* is us, not me. Moreover, Lahti (2022) emphasizes *latent power* as one of the subcategories of beneficial *sisu* as an embodied phenomenon as she describes that "latent power points to something somatic and un-thought rather than mental and "willed" (p. 45). In our data we do not see collective *sisu* to emerge as an embodied or somatic reaction but rather connect it with group dynamics. However, as Lahti's explanation of *sisu* as latent power, collective *sisu* seems to appear from nowhere. This was reflected, for example, in the fact that the interviewed managers were unable to analyse what they had done to bring out the collective *sisu* when asked about it.

The interviewees could refer to the common mission "yes, let's make food for the Finns" (Manager 5)

or the metaphor "somehow it became a way of thinking about winning the war and going forward" (Manager 15) when describing collective *sisu* but could not describe their own role in stating the mission or inventing the metaphor.

### Discussion

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the world of work in many ways. This study has looked at the well-being of managers in workplaces where it was not possible to switch to teleworking. The study made use of the Finnish concept of *sisu*, firstly because its two-dimensional character was seen to offer new insights to coping in times of crisis, secondly because the use of non-English concepts is valuable and enriches the research literature (Lomas, 2016). From the point of view of research on *sisu*, this study was conducted in a unique situation, where the interviews were carried out in the middle of a long period of crisis, and the interviewees were able to reflect on their past experiences as well as on the current situation. Similar kinds of conditions would be impossible to replicate for research as COVID 19-pandemic was the first global crisis in this magnitude. Potential next global disruption would not create similar experiences because of the lessons learnt in COVID 19-pandemic. In this study, efforts have been made to improve the trustworthiness of the analysis by describing the data, the rounds of analysis and the categorization in detail.

The two-dimensional concept of *sisu* used in this study and the results of the study, interpreted within this framework, provide new insights into the well-being of managers in crisis situations. There is no exclusive benefit or harm to *sisu*, and even the benefits of beneficial *sisu* may dissolve as the crisis continues. As in previous research on *sisu* (Henttonen et al., 2022; Lahti, 2019; Määtänen et al., 2021), the results of this study suggest that beneficial *sisu* helps to overcome adversity, while harmful *sisu* causes distortions in thinking that are detrimental to the managers themselves.

The aim of this study was to find out how beneficial and harmful *sisu* affect managerial work in challenging times. Even in normal times, managerial work is full of conflicting demands and insufficient resources (Asplund et al., 2022). The results of the study can be seen as making three contributions to the study of *sisu*. First, the long pandemic caused so many situations where beneficial *sisu* was used by the managers that the beneficial effect of *sisu* seemed to end and gradually turn harmful and endanger the manager's well-being. Such a possible mechanism is difficult to detect in a cross-sectional study.

Secondly, this study highlighted conceptual unclarity in extant *sisu*-related research. Previous research (Henttonen et al., 2022; Lahti, 2019) describe beneficial

sisu as goal-directed action that transcends previous physical and mental limits, and harmful sisu is defined as the inability to stop in time. The present study with its data on managers weighing whether to continue or stop action in challenging situations challenges this conceptualization. If beneficial sisu is never giving up, how could harmful sisu be inability to stop in time?

One possible interpretation of this dilemma is that the decision to continue or stop in a difficult situation is a paradoxical tension in the manager's work (Smith & Lewis, 2012; Waldman & Bowen, 2016). Previous research suggests that managerial work frequently requires handling a variety of situations where managers need to balance between two options which both seem logically right but are in contradiction with each other (Smith & Lewis, 2012; Zhang et al., 2015). We suggest the decision of continuing or stopping in a hopeless situation is this kind of a tension. Both continuing and quitting seem equally right, but managers must balance their actions amidst the tension.

The third contribution of the research is collective sisu. Organizational research has previously identified the phenomenon whereby group cohesion can rise when a group faces an external threat (Markides & Cohn, 1982), but previous research on sisu has not identified the phenomenon of collective sisu because research has focused on individuals. Collective sisu refers joint energy that emerges as a latent power in a difficult situation, as the group jointly "puts up a good fight" (Lahti, 2022, p. 24). Collective sisu was seen in this study as a very positive driving force, both for the individual and for the work community. In leadership research, collective sisu could also be linked to views of shared leadership (Zhu et al., 2018). In crisis employees need leadership, but it could also be shared. Further research on collective sisu can be recommended. A particular focus point of that study could be the managers' use of symbolic mission statements or metaphors in connection with collective sisu. Our findings suggest that managers use symbolic leadership use symbolic leadership (Bolman & Deal, 1991) without personally recognizing or being familiar with it.

The quote "either cry and die or move on" which was presented earlier in this paper sums up the feelings of many managers during the COVID-19 pandemic. A crisis like the COVID 19-pandemic had never been experienced before, and as a result, every manager had to find new ways to keep the business running and themselves viable. While a similar prolonged period of crisis would not happen again for these managers, it is important for both research and practical manager work to identify key lessons from the pandemic period. The work and resilience of leaders in times of crisis has been identified as an important research topic (Williams et al., 2017), but empirical research on managers' own resilience in

times of crisis is so far scarce and often marginalized in crisis management models. Previous research on managerial resilience suggests that managers have a better starting point for stress than other employees (Korman et al., 2022; Sherman et al., 2012; Skakon et al., 2011) and often regard themselves and not their organization responsible for maintaining their well-being (Mayer & Boness, 2011), but given the link between manager resilience and organizational resilience (Branicki et al., 2019), managers' resilience and their well-being may become critical for organizational resilience.

Three lessons can be learnt from this study for practical manager work. First, beneficial sisu helps in a crisis situation, but the manager must be concerned about his or her own resources and not believe that one situation after another is temporary. Secondly, it is good for the manager to recognize and accept a paradoxical tension in a situation where there is a choice between moving forward beyond one's own limits or giving up. There is no one right answer, so understanding one's own tendency to use beneficial or harmful sisu in difficult situations can help in decision-making. Third, collective sisu is an excellent resource for overcoming difficult situations. If it emerges in the workplace, the manager has succeeded in sharing leadership in a crisis situation. In addition to managing expectations of themselves, in times of exception, the manager should pay particular attention to managing the expectations of the environment. It is sometimes beneficial to have the courage to say, as the hotel manager quoted above did: "I'm not a rainmaker, even though I'm your boss".

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

### Funding

The work was supported by the European Social Fund Plus.

### Notes on contributors

*Johanna Vuori* works as a principal lecturer at Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences in the research area of entrepreneurship and business transformation. She completed her PhD in administrative studies at University of Tampere in 2011 and was a visiting scholar at University of Michigan in 2012 – 2013. Dr Vuori has had multiple faculty and administrative roles and has worked as a senior lecturer, an international coordinator, a student counsellor, a programme coordinator, a degree programme director and a project manager. In her present role she combines teaching Master-level classes on management and organizations with research in these areas. Her current interests lie in the study of the wellbeing of managers and the development of post-hierarchical organizations.

*Ilmari Määttänen* works as a university researcher in the department of Psychology and Logopedics at University of



Helsinki. Ilmari Määttänen's recent main research topic has been the Finnish concept of *sisu*, which describes perseverance against overwhelming odds. *Sisu* has been studied in his own small research group in Academy of Finland-funded *Sisu at Work* and EURA/ESR-funded *Sisu in working life-projects*. His other postdoctoral research has included studying the relationships of physiological stress-reactivity, psychological background variables and affects as well as performance. The goal has been to maintain links to applied research. Methods have included laboratory research and mobile measurement and self-report devices (mobile stress measurement). Side projects include research topics that are relevant in terms of evolutionary psychology and psychoneuroendocrinology.

## ORCID

Johanna Vuori  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5130-0036>

## References

- Ansell, C. M., Sørensen, E., & Torfing, J. (2020). The COVID-19 pandemic as a game changer for public administration and leadership? The need for robust governance responses to turbulent problems. *Public Management Review*, 23(7), 949–960. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2020.1820272>
- Asplund, S., Åhlin, J., Åström, S., & Lindgren, B. M. (2022). Experiences of being a manager in the municipal sector in rural northern Sweden. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-Being*, 17(1), 2139346. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17482631.2022.2139346>
- Bolman, L. G., & Deal, T. E. (1991). Leadership and management effectiveness: A multi-frame, multi-sector analysis. *Human Resource Management*, 30(4), 509–534. <https://doi.org/10.1002/hrm.3930300406>
- Branicki, L., Steyer, V., & Sullivan Taylor, B. (2019). Why resilience managers aren't resilient, and what human resource management can do about it. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 30(8), 1261–1286. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2016.1244104>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Burnard, P. (1991). A method of analysing interview transcripts in qualitative research. *Nurse Education Today*, 11(6), 461–466. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0260-6917\(91\)90009-Y](https://doi.org/10.1016/0260-6917(91)90009-Y)
- Dirani, K. M., Abadi, M., Alizadeh, A., Barhate, B., Garza, R. C., Gunasekara, N., Ibrahim, G., & Majzun, Z. (2020). Leadership competencies and the essential role of human resource development in times of crisis: A response to covid-19 pandemic. *Human Resource Development International*, 23(4), 380–394. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13678868.2020.1780078>
- Duckworth, A. L., Peterson, C., Matthews, M. D., & Kelly, D. R. (2007). *Sisu*: Perseverance and passion for long-term goals. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 92(6), 1087–1101. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.92.6.1087>
- Dutheil, F., Jeanton, C., Vilmant, A., Lambert, C., Clinchamps, M., Ugbohue, U. C., Schmidt, J., Vallet, G. T., & Bouillon-Minois, J. B. (2022). Work-related stress of companies' directors during the first lockdown due to the COVID-19. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 13, 975953. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2022.975953>
- Förster, C., & Ducheck, S. (2022). Leaders' resilience: What leaders can learn from the COVID-19 crisis. In S. K. Dhiman & J. F. Margues (Eds.), *Leadership after COVID-19* (pp. 17–30). Springer. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-84867-5\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-84867-5_2)
- Giousmpasoglou, C., Marinakou, E., & Zopiatis, A. (2021). Hospitality managers in turbulent times: The COVID-19 crisis. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 33(4), 1297–1318. <https://doi.org/10.1108/ijchm-07-2020-0741>
- Graf-Vlachy, L., Sun, S., & Zhang, S. X. (2020). Predictors of managers' mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic. *European Journal of Psychotraumatology*, 11(1), 1834195. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20008198.2020.1834195>
- Henttonen, P., Määttänen, I., Makkonen, E., Honka, A., Seppälä, V., Närväinen, J., Garcia-Velasquez, R., Airaksinen, J., Jokela, M., & Lahti, E. E. (2022). A measure for assessment of beneficial and harmful fortitude: Development and initial validation of the *sisu* scale. *Heliyon*, 8(11), 11483. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2022.e11483>
- Herttuala, N., Kokkinen, L., & Konu, A. (2020). Social-and healthcare managers' work wellbeing—literature review and key informant interviews. *International Journal of Workplace Health Management*, 13(6), 633–648. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJWHM-05-2019-0077>
- Irehill, H., Lundmark, R., & Tafvelin, S. (2023). The well-being of young leaders: Demands and resources from a lifespan perspective. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 14, 1187936. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1187936>
- Korman, J. V., Van Quaquebeke, N., & Tröster, C. (2022). Managers are less burned-out at the top: The roles of sense of power and self-efficacy at different hierarchy levels. *Journal of Business and Psychology*, 37(1), 151–171. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10869-021-09733-8>
- Kvale, I. (2007). *Doing interviews*. Sage.
- Lahti, E. E. (2019). Embodied fortitude: An introduction to the Finnish construct of *sisu*. *International Journal of Wellbeing*, 9(1), 61–82. <https://doi.org/10.5502/ijw.v9i1.672>
- Lahti, E. E. (2022). *Sisu as Sisu, Grace, and Gentleness-A Way of Life, Growth, and Being in Times of Adversity*. [Aalto University publication series Doctoral Theses, 97/2022]. Retrieved October 1, 2022, from <http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-64-0872-9>
- Ledesma, J. (2014). Conceptual frameworks and research models on resilience in leadership. *SAGE Open*, 4(3), 215824401454546. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244014545464>
- Li, W. D., Schaubroeck, J. M., Xie, J. L., & Keller, A. C. (2018). Is being a leader a mixed blessing? A dual-pathway model linking leadership role occupancy to well-being. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 39(8), 971–989. <https://doi.org/10.1002/job.2273>
- Li, L., Zhang, S. X., & Graf-Vlachy, L. (2022). Predicting managers' mental health across countries: Using country-level COVID-19 statistics. *Frontiers in Public Health*, 10, 791977. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2022.791977>
- Lomas, T. (2016). Towards a positive cross-cultural lexicography: Enriching our emotional landscape through 216 'untranslatable' words pertaining to well-being. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 11(5), 546–558. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2015.1127993>
- Lombardi, S., Pina, E., Cunha, M., & Giustiniano, L. (2021). Improvising resilience: The unfolding of resilient

- leadership in COVID-19 times. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 95, 102904. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhm.2021.102904>
- Määttänen, I., Makkonen, E., Jokela, M., Närväinen, J., Väliaho, J., Seppälä, V., Kylmä, J., & Henttonen, P. (2021). Evidence for a behaviourally measurable perseverance trait in humans. *Behavioral Sciences*, 11(9), 123. <https://doi.org/10.3390/bs11090123>
- Markides, K. C., & Cohn, S. F. (1982). External conflict/internal cohesion: A reevaluation of an old theory. *American Sociological Review*, 47(1), 88–98. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2095044>
- Mayer, C. H., & Boness, C. (2011). Concepts of health and well-being in managers: An organizational study. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-Being*, 6(4), 7143. <https://doi.org/10.3402/qhw.v6i4.7143>
- Mencl, J., Wefald, A. J., & van Ittersum, K. W. (2016). Transformational leader attributes: Interpersonal skills, engagement, and well-being. *Leadership & Organization Development Journal*, 37(5), 635–657. <https://doi.org/10.1108/LODJ-09-2014-0178>
- Pearson, C. M., & Clair, J. (1998). Reframing crisis management. *The Academy of Management Review*, 23(1), 59–76. <https://doi.org/10.2307/259099>
- Sherman, G. D., Lee, J. J., Cuddy, A. J., Renshon, J., Oveis, C., Gross, J. J., & Lerner, J. S. (2012). Leadership is associated with lower levels of stress. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 109(44), 17903–17907. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1207042109>
- Sjöblom, K., Mäkinen, J. P., & Mäkikangas, A. (2022). “I was given three marks and told to buy a Porsche”—supervisors’ experiences of leading psychosocial safety climate and team psychological safety in a remote academic setting. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19(19), 12016. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph191912016>
- Skakon, J., Kristensen, T. S., Christensen, K. B., Lund, T., & Labriola, M. (2011). Do managers experience more stress than employees? Results from the intervention project on absence and well-being (IPAW) study among Danish managers and their employees. *Work*, 38(2), 103–109. <https://doi.org/10.3233/WOR-2011-1112>
- Smith, W. K., & Lewis, M. W. (2012). Leadership skills for managing paradoxes. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, 5(2), 227–231. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1754-9434.2012.01435.x>
- Vaismoradi, M., & Snelgrove, S. (2019). Theme in Qualitative content analysis and thematic analysis. *Forum Qualitative Social Research/Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 20(3). <https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-20.3.3376>
- van Zoonen, W., Sivunen, A., Blomqvist, K., Olsson, T., Ropponen, A., Henttonen, K., & Vartiainen, M. (2021). Understanding stressor-strain relationships during the COVID-19 pandemic: The role of social support, adjustment to remote work, and work-life conflict. *Journal of Management & Organization*, 27(6), 1038–1059. <https://doi.org/10.1017/jmo.2021.50>
- Waldman, D. A., & Bowen, D. E. (2016). Learning to be a paradox-savvy leader. *Academy of Management Perspectives*, 30(3), 316–327. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amp.2015.0070>
- Weick, K. E. (1993). The collapse of sensemaking in organizations: The Mann Gulch disaster. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 38(4), 628–652. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2393339>
- Williams, T. A., Gruber, D. A., Sutcliffe, K. M., Shepherd, D. A., & Zhao, E. Y. (2017). Organizational response to adversity: Fusing crisis management and resilience research streams. *Academy of Management Annals*, 11(2), 733–769. <https://doi.org/10.5465/annals.2015.0134>
- Zhang, Y., Waldman, D. A., Han, Y.-L., & Li, X.-B. (2015). Paradoxical leader behaviors in people management: Antecedents and consequences. *Academy of Management Journal*, 58(2), 538–566. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2012.0995>
- Zhu, J., Liao, Z., Yam, K. C., & Johnson, R. E. (2018). Shared leadership: A state-of-the-art review and future research agenda. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 39(7), 834–852. <https://doi.org/10.1002/job.2296>

## Appendix 1. The interview guide

### COVID-19 pandemic in your industry through the eyes of your organisation

Please tell me about the pandemic in your organization  
 What has been the most challenging aspect of being a manager for you during the pandemic?  
 What are the most significant lessons you have learned or changes in your thinking that you've experienced?  
 Have you had to furlough or terminate employees yourself?  
 Were you stressed about these situations beforehand?  
 How did you cope with these situations?  
 Have you personally been furloughed?  
 How did you support your employees when they returned to work?

### Employee well-being

In what situations have you personally become aware of employees' well-being issues?  
 How has financial insecurity manifested itself, and what have you been able to do about it?  
 What other factors have posed a threat to employee well-being?  
 Have customer demands been particularly burdensome?  
 What actions have you taken to support your employees?  
 Have there been extended sick leaves related to employee well-being?  
 Has it affected customer service?  
 How have well-being challenges differed from the pre-COVID era?

### Managers' well-being

Could you please share your own experiences regarding well-being during the pandemic?  
 Do you engage in discussions about the well-being of managers within your organization?  
 What kind of support have you received for your managerial responsibilities during these extraordinary times?  
 Have you received support from your immediate superior, your team, and/or your colleagues?  
 Have you undergone training related to staff layoffs and terminations?  
 Was the support and training you received adequate, or were there specific aspects you wished for more assistance with?  
 Have you had to work significantly more overtime?  
 Where have you found resources to support your personal well-being?  
 Have you sought external support, read relevant literature, or participated in training programmes?  
 Have your boundaries regarding work-life balance undergone any changes?  
 Are you able to disconnect from work during your leisure time?

### Working life after the pandemic

Do you have ideas on how the working life is changing after the pandemic?  
 How is working life changing specifically at your workplace and in your industry?  
 What can be done to support the well-being of the current workforce?  
 Is the sense of meaningfulness in work changing for employees?  
 Is a labour shortage threatening your industry?

### Sisu

Is sisu part of your vocabulary?  
 Is sisu a good thing at the workplace?  
 Have you seen examples of sisu at the workplace?  
 Can you, as a manager, expect sisu from employees?  
 Do you feel that senior management has expected middle managers to use sisu during the current COVID-19 pandemic?