

**Methods:**

A cross-sectional survey was carried out between October and November 2020, using online questionnaires, involving medical and nursing leaders working in the healthcare organizations of the Friuli-Venezia Giulia Region (Northeast of Italy). Professionals from hospital, community setting and regional level were asked about the two most challenging phases of the current pandemic among: crisis early recognition, peak of the emergency phase, declining epidemic, long tail. The most important healthcare leaders' skills were investigated among competence, awareness, communication, decision-making, inspiring trust and data interpretation.

**Results:**

A total of 48 healthcare leaders participated. Women were 56.3%. Mean age was  $53.4 \pm 7.9$ . According to the leaders interviewed, the two most challenging phases of such crisis were crisis early recognition (45%) and the peak phase (31%). Lesser important phases were recognized in the declining epidemic (15%) and the long tail phases (8%). Concerning healthcare leaders' skills required to manage with pandemic, the most reported were communication (35%) and decision-making (26%); while lower importance was identified in inspiring confidence (5%).

**Conclusions:**

The two most challenging phases identified by this study suggested the importance of public health surveillance and monitoring systems. Communication appeared a critical success factor for leaders in public health emergencies.

**Key messages:**

- Early recognition of the crisis and the emergency peak management are considered the most challenging phases of the COVID19 pandemic by healthcare leaders.
- Ability to communicate and decision-making emerged as the two most important crisis skills, and should be included among public health leaders core competencies.

## The most challenging COVID19 phases and the skills healthcare leaders need to face the pandemic

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**Introduction:**

Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID19) pandemic is the most significant public health threat of the century, a crisis that have been challenging healthcare systems around the world. Assessment of leadership skills is needed in order to identify attributes of successful leadership during public health emergencies. This study aims to highlight the critical role played by healthcare leaders during this pandemic, assessing the most challenging and demanding phases of the health crisis and the characteristics required for a healthcare leader.