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 ± 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.