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Leadership Styles among Faculty Academics in a Malaysian University: A Preliminary Insight

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Abstract

Universities in Malaysia are putting a never-ending effort to ensure academics' growth through strong leadership. Leadership program such as mentor-mentee is being re-highlighted to help faculties prosper. However, the success of such effort highly depends on leadership style that is not inclined towards hierarchy and bureaucracy. Therefore, this paper aims to investigate the dynamics of leadership styles (transformational leadership, transactional leadership, and laissez-faire leadership) exhibited by academics in a faculty of a Malaysian university. This paper offers a descriptive result describing the most practiced leadership styles among the academics. The results indicate that most academics exhibit high level of both transformational and transactional leadership behaviours with the latter being the most frequently used leadership style.

Keywords: Transformational Leadership, Transactional Leadership, Laissez-Faire Leadership, Collegiality, Faculty

Introduction

In every organization, leaders play an important role to represent formal and informal procedures, decisions, and activities in organisations (Demirtas & Akdogan, 2015; Rydland & Stensaker, 2018). Leaders are significant influencers of attitudes and behaviours of their peers and subordinates, which eventually determine the efficacy and accomplishment of the organisation. Yukl (2013) explained that as an organisation becomes larger and more complex, managing becomes more important, hence, leadership becomes more crucial. It is undeniable that leadership is important in all organisations, and universities are no exclusion (Bieletzki, 2018). The transformation of a university must be driven by university academics at all levels, namely the department, faculty, and the central university administration. However, leadership in university holds a unique concept as universities are academic-based institutions seeking to serve the wider world beyond just itself (Bieletzki, 2018).

University leadership role is complex as academics are often challenged to balance administrative control and academic autonomy, while consequently creating an open and welcoming atmosphere for the students (Williams, 2007). Practically, academics are often

defined with both management and supervisory responsibilities (Heng & Marsh, 2009) and balancing those instances is not an easy task even for a highly educated, developed, and experienced academics (Brown & Moshavi, 2002). Academic autonomy requires collegial leadership style that emphasize teamwork and collective decision rather than hierarchy and bureaucracy.

Universities across the globe: Southeast Asia – Vietnam, Taiwan, Indonesia, and Thailand as well as Western countries – the United States of America, the United Kingdom and France, have been trying to nurture leadership style that emphasizes collegiality and teamwork such as transformational leadership among academics and faculty members (Phuong et al., 2015; Phuong et al., 2018; Peters, 2020). Similarly, universities in Malaysia have been trying to distance themselves from extreme hierarchy and bureaucracy as they require leadership that is based on consideration, intellectual stimulation, collegiality, trust, motivation, and mutual respect which closely relates to transformational leadership (Christopher, 2012; Huang & Marginson, 2017).

Yet, the industrialisation of universities these days has made it very challenging for faculty academics to preserve leadership that effectively incorporate the uniqueness of universities as knowledge-based institutions (Peters, 2020). As a primary step towards leadership paradigm among faculty academics, it is crucial that their leadership patterns and dynamics are assessed. A strategic course of action may then be developed and implemented to achieve the desired leadership paradigm (Alonderiene & Majauskaite, 2016). Bass (1985) argued that second-order leadership domain is composed of transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire.

It is depicted that if faculty academics frequently exhibit and practice high level of transformational leadership, then the faculty would be well-ordered (Vinger & Cilliers, 2006). Thus, this paper aims to establish the frequency of transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership styles practiced by faculty academics who work in a public research university in Malaysia. This study seeks to answer the following question: Which leadership style (transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire) is the most practiced by the faculty academics? Therefore, the objective of this study is to determine the levels of transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership style among the academics. The next section of this paper will provide a conceptualisation of the three leadership styles. The paper continues with methods of the study, results, and finally ends with a conclusion.

Conceptualising Leadership Style and Approach

Although leadership has been one of the most investigated phenomena in the field of social sciences, it is to this date, one of the most challenging themes due to its complex nature (Wallace et al., 2021). Leadership style is defined as behaviour pattern that a leader exhibits while he/she is working with and through others (Ali et al., 2013). According to Bass and Bass (2009), leadership constitutes interactions between a group of two or more members that often involves perceptions and expectations of the members. Bass (1999) suggests that every leader displays a frequency of the three leadership styles (transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire), but commonly exhibits more of one and less of the other.

Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership focuses on the commitments and competencies of institutional members and the higher level of personal commitments to organisational objectives, as well as greater capacities for goal achievement that contribute to the productivity of the institution (Para-González et al., 2018). Transformational leaders influence peers and subordinates through encouragement, motivation, and inspiration to perform to the best of their abilities (Charoensukmongkol & Puyod, 2021). According to Singh (2014), collegiality is a key factor in transformational leadership, which seeks to transform bureaucratic management practices in universities.

Transformational leadership pays attention the intrinsic needs and desires of employees to motivate their work performance. The charisma, positive personality and strengths of a transformational leader inspires internal motivation of the followers to excel in their tasks (Bo, 2013). Direct or indirect coercion on the excuse of hierarchy and power gap is essentially a non-existing element in transformational leadership. Transformational leaders attempt to support and help followers to attain their fullest potential (Tabassi et al., 2014).

Collegiality is one of the core elements of transformational leadership that entails academic autonomy, decision-making based on a process of discussions, agreements, and consensus among faculty members who are considered to have a common perception of the institutional objectives (Bush, 2011, p. 72). Collegiality in transformational leadership, nevertheless, involves the elements of teamwork, trust, and mutual respect (Singh, 2014). Scholars identified four key components of transformational leadership (Northouse, 2001; Bass, 1999; Bass & Avolio, 1992; 1994)

- Idealised influence: The degree to which leaders act as role models, holds subordinates' trust, create strong emotions from them, maintain their faith and respect and appeal to their hopes and dreams.
- Inspirational motivation: The degree to which leaders provide shared vision and try to make others feel the significance of their work.
- Intellectual stimulation: The degree to which leaders encourage creativity in others, tolerate extreme positions and nurture others to challenge their own values and beliefs and those of their leaders and organisation.
- Individualised consideration: The degree to which leaders show interest in others' well-being, assign projects individually, and pay attention to those who seem less involved in the group.

Transactional Leadership

Transactional leadership involves exchanges or transactions whereby leaders discuss their role requirements with their followers and specify the rewards the latter will receive if they meet those requirements (Bass & Avolio, 1994). In transactional leadership, those in the position of power i.e., leaders, provide rewards and punishments as a part of leader-follower relations (Khan, 2017). Transactional leadership is also known as cost-benefit exchange

leadership between leaders and followers (Kuhnert & Lewis, 1987). Leaders possess valuable knowledge, information or power that can be offered to their followers in exchange for the followers' services.

Tavanti (2008, p. 1) explained that "the success of this type of leader-follower relationship depends on the acceptance of hierarchical differences and the ability to work through this mode of exchange." Rewards offered by transactional leaders to their subordinates may include knowledge, information, job promotion, salary increment, political and even psychological. However, given the nature of reward and punishment of this leadership style, achievements, outcome and/or performance by the subordinates tend to be short-term (Rowold & Schlotz, 2009). Scholars identified two transactional leadership key components (Northouse, 2001; Bass, 1999; Bass & Avolio, 1992; 1994):

- Contingent reward: The degree to which leaders tell others what to do to be rewarded, emphasised what is expected from them and recognise their accomplishments.
- Management-by-exception (active and passive): The extent to which leaders practice corrective criticism, negative feedback, and negative reinforcement.

Laissez-faire Leadership

Laissez-faire leadership is often referred as non-leadership because leaders do not take responsibility and avoid interactions with their followers. This means that, leaders abdicate responsibilities and avoid making decisions (Breevaart & Zacher, 2019; Bass & Avolio, 1990). Although academics in universities require freedom and autonomy, the concept of the 'abdication of responsibilities' offered by laissez-faire leadership style completely ignores the needs and welfare of subordinates. Laissez-faire leaders do not attend to employees' relational needs (Robert & Vandenberghe, 2021). Because of that, employees tend to feel neglected and will not be motivated to cooperate and contribute to achieve institutional goals.

Laissez-faire leaders "avoid decision-making, abdicate their responsibilities, delay actions and refrain from using the authority associated with their roles" (Robert & Vandenberghe, 2021, p. 535). It is argued that laissez-faire leaders disassociate themselves from responsibilities to nurture sense of independency and autonomy among their followers. However, most employees have strong relational needs and require continuous support from their leaders, but laissez-faire leaders do not particularly invest in relationships (Robert & Vandenberghe, 2021). In contrast with the concept of leader-member exchange (LMX), employees expect relationships and interactions between themselves and their leaders. Thus, the absence of interaction hinders employees' sense of belonging and discourage their effort to contribute to the best of their abilities.

Methods

This is a quantitative, descriptive research involving a total of 267 faculty academics in a public research university in Malaysia. Descriptive research design seeks to describe the state of the variable involved in the study. There are no presumed relationships and/or cause or effects and therefore, no independent or dependent variable (Jenkins et al., 2021). Mathews (2019)

highlighted that within a single university, academics in faculties culturize different practices of leadership, known as the academic tribe. This means that dynamism and differences in leadership exist within faculties across a single university. Hence, investigating and understanding leadership across faculties in a university is crucial. The shortened Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) 6S by Northouse (2001) was used to measure transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership. The MLQ 6S was initially developed by (Bass and Avolio, 1992) further simplified by Northouse, 2001). The MLQ 6S is a free, self-assessment questionnaire using a 5-point Likert-type scale instrument consisting of 21 questions. The data was analysed using descriptive statistical tools (IBM SPSS 23) to establish the frequency, percentage, mean and standard deviation.

Results

Table 1 illustrates the demographic profile of the respondents. A majority of 65.00% of the faculty academics are female and the remaining 35.00% are male. A massive 85.00% of them are working in the university as senior lecturers, while only 8.30% of them are associate professor. The remaining 5.60% and 0.70% of the academics are professors and lecturers, respectively. A vast percentage of 68.90 of them are working in the School of Medical Sciences, followed by 17.20% in the School of Health Sciences and 13.90% in the School of Dental Sciences.

Table 1
Demographic Profile of the Respondents

Variable	Freq.	%
Gender		
Male	96	35.00
Female	171	65.00
Designation		
Professor	15	5.60
Associate Professor	22	8.30
Senior Lecturer	228	85.40
Lecturer	2	0.70
Department		
School of Medical Sciences	184	68.90
School of Health Sciences	46	17.20
School of Dental Sciences	37	13.90

Table 2

Provides the Frequency Distribution of the Academics' Responses to the MLQ 6S Questionnaire

Table 2. Academics' perception of their leadership behaviour

No.	Items		0	1	2	3	4
			Not at all	Once in a while	Sometimes	Fairly often	Frequently, if not always
1.	I make others feel good to be around me	Freq. %	0 0.00	2 0.70	33 12.40	101 37.80	131 49.10
2.	I express with a few simple words what we could and should do	Freq. %	0 0.00	9 3.40	39 14.60	139 52.00	80 30.00
3.	I enable others to think about old problems in new ways	Freq. %	1 0.40	20 7.50	54 20.20	115 43.10	77 28.80
4.	I help others develop themselves	Freq. %	1 0.40	5 1.80	49 18.40	92 34.50	120 44.90
5.	I tell others what to do if they want to be rewarded for their work	Freq. %	0 0.00	12 4.50	63 23.60	109 40.80	83 31.10
6.	I am satisfied when others meet agreed-upon standards	Freq. %	0 0.00	4 1.50	25 9.40	88 33.00	150 56.10
7.	I am content to let others continue working in the same ways always	Freq. %	11 4.20	59 22.10	105 39.30	74 27.70	18 6.70
8.	Others have complete faith in me	Freq. %	2 0.70	6 2.20	60 22.50	136 50.90	63 23.60
9.	I provide appealing images about what we can do	Freq. %	2 0.80	15 5.60	60 22.50	136 50.90	54 20.20
10.	I provide others with new ways of looking at puzzling things	Freq. %	2 0.70	16 6.00	53 19.90	121 45.30	75 28.10
11.	I let others know how I think they are doing	Freq. %	2 0.70	22 8.30	79 29.60	101 37.80	63 23.60
12.	I provide recognition/rewards when others reach their goals	Freq. %	3 1.10	12 4.50	55 20.60	89 33.30	108 40.50
13.	As long as things are working, I do not try to change anything	Freq. %	5 1.90	36 13.50	85 31.80	101 37.80	40 15.00
14.	Whatever others want to do is OK with me	Freq. %	14 5.10	56 21.0	104 39.00	72 27.00	21 7.90
15.	Others are proud to be associated with me	Freq. %	1 0.40	14 5.20	81 30.30	118 44.20	53 19.90

16.	I help others find meaning in their work	Freq.	0	13	46	116	92
		%	0.00	4.90	17.20	43.40	34.50
17.	I get others to rethink ideas that they had never questioned before	Freq.	0	20	57	118	72
		%	0.00	7.50	21.30	44.20	27.00
18.	I give personal attention to others who seem rejected	Freq.	3	10	77	101	76
		%	1.10	3.70	28.80	37.80	28.60
19.	I call attention to what others can get for what they accomplish	Freq.	0	19	59	131	58
		%	0.00	7.10	22.10	49.10	21.70
20.	I tell others the standards they have to know to carry out their work	Freq.	3	7	38	113	106
		%	1.20	2.60	14.20	42.30	39.70
21.	I ask no more of others than what is absolutely essential	Freq.	0	32	77	114	44
		%	0.00	12.00	28.80	42.70	16.50

Table 3 shows the academics' levels of leadership dimensions. Generally, academics exhibit high levels of idealised influence (M=9.07, S.D=1.84), inspirational motivation (M=9.00, S.D=1.93), intellectual stimulation (M=8.77; S.D=2.32), individual consideration (M=8.86, S.D=2.09), contingent reward (M=8.91, S.D=2.14), and management-by-exception (M=9.11, S.D=1.79). However, most academics exhibit only moderate level of laissez-faire (M=6.86, S.D=2.01).

Table 3
Academics' levels of leadership dimensions

Variable	Freq.	%	Mean	Standard Deviation
Idealised influence			9.07	1.84
Low	3	1.10		
Moderate	87	32.60		
High	177	66.30		
Inspirational motivation			9.00	1.93
Low	5	1.90		
Moderate	87	32.60		
High	175	65.50		
Intellectual stimulation			8.77	2.32
Low	15	5.60		
Moderate	89	33.40		
High	163	61.00		
Individual consideration			8.86	2.09
Low	7	2.60		
Moderate	107	40.10		
High	153	57.30		
Contingent reward			8.91	2.14

Low	6	2.20		
Moderate	94	35.20		
High	167	62.60		
Management-by-exception			9.11	1.79
Low	2	0.70		
Moderate	88	33.00		
High	177	66.30		
Laissez-faire leadership			6.86	2.01
Low	29	10.90		
Moderate	172	64.40		
High	66	24.70		

Note: Low (0-4); Moderate (5-8); High (9-12)

In line with the results presented in Table 3, most academics exhibit high level (55.50%) of transformational leadership, followed by moderate level (41.90%) and low level (2.60%) with the mean and standard deviation values of 8.93 and 1.80, respectively. With regards to transactional leadership, most of the academics exhibit high level (59.60%) of transactional leadership, followed by moderate level (39.00%) and low level (1.40%) with the mean and standard deviation values of 9.01 and 1.73, respectively. Finally, a massive 64.40% of the academics exhibit moderate level of laissez-faire leadership, followed by high level (24.70%) and low level (10.90%) with the mean and standard deviation values of 6.85 and 2.00, respectively.

Table 4
Academics' levels of leadership styles

Variable	Freq.	%	Mean	Standard Deviation
Transformational leadership			8.93	1.80
Low	7	2.60		
Moderate	112	41.90		
High	148	55.50		
Transactional leadership			9.01	1.73
Low	4	1.40		
Moderate	104	39.00		
High	159	59.60		
Laissez-faire leadership			6.85	2.00
Low	29	10.90		
Moderate	172	64.40		
High	66	24.70		

Note: Low (0-4); Moderate (5-8); High (9-12)

Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that academics exhibit high levels of both transformational and transactional leadership. This can be seen from the high levels of each element of transformational (idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individual consideration) and transactional leadership (contingent reward and management-by-exception) styles. As depicted by scholars, academics require leadership that is based on consideration, intellectual stimulation, collegiality, trust, motivation, and mutual respect which is closely related to transformational leadership. However, based on the empirical findings presented in the previous section, this paper concludes that although most academics exhibit high levels of both transformational and transactional leadership behaviours, the latter is practiced slightly more frequent than the former due to the difference in the mean values. This study further proves that the attempt to reach the desired leadership paradigm among faculty academics is yet to be fully achieved. Hence, a more robust action plan must be strategized to further disseminate and nurture transformational leadership behaviours among academics such as a series of leadership training and development programmes. It is suggested for future research to further expand the scope and generalisability of the current findings by expanding the research site to include other faculties and universities. Nevertheless, future research may consider conducting inferential analysis involving other variables to further complement the findings of this study.

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