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The Influence of E-Leadership on Employee Motivation While Working from Home During Crisis

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Abstract

Work from home (WFH) implies that employees perform tasks from their respective homes, with virtually no interaction between leader and employee. According to previous literature, organisations began implementing WFH in the 1970s, but in Malaysia, large-scale implementation of work-from-home policies began with the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2019. The purpose of this study is to determine how middle-level leaders' implementation of e-leadership affects employee motivation in three departments of the Malaysian Ministry of Education (MOE). The quantitative methods of surveys were used to collect data for this study. A questionnaire was used as a research tool, with 94 employees participating out of a total population of 124. The data collected for this study were analysed using IBM SPSS statistics version 22 to perform simple linear regression analysis and descriptive analysis. The results of the study show that e-leadership has a great impact on employee motivation when working from home during a crisis. This finding suggests that MOE needs to pay attention to e-leadership practised among middle leaders especially when employees work from home during a crisis since employee motivation is the key to organizational development nowadays.

Keywords: Crisis, E-Leadership, Employee Motivation

Introduction

The world today is volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA). Leadership agility and adaptability have evolved into skills required of leaders in the VUCA world (Amin, 2020). Leaders must frequently use competencies that they have never used before in such situations. There are several types of crises that have occurred and affected the MOE. One of the crises that occurred and involved MOE was an air pollution crisis that occurred in Pasir Gudang, Johor, as a result of illegal toxic waste in Sungai Kim Kim. Besides that, there is also a crisis that occurs on a large scale and involves the entire country including the MOE which is the spread of the COVID-19 epidemic, which began at the end of 2019, prompting the government to implement a variety of measures to halt the virus's rapid spread in the first quarter of 2020. This includes closing down businesses, implementing health protocols, and restricting people's mobility. Not only in Malaysia, but half of the workforce in high-income

regions of the world, such as North America and Western Europe, has been able to work from home (WFH) throughout the pandemic.

WFH is one of the workplace strategies used by companies capable of ensuring their operations' survival and continuity. WFH is defined as a flexible working strategy that is not limited by location, technical communication type, or time constraints (Cabrera, 2020). Actually, based on the past literature, organizations began implementing WFH in the 1970s, and several studies have now been conducted to investigate the effects of WFH. In Malaysia, as the pandemic Covid-19 spread from 2019 to 2021 and the number of positive cases increased, the majority of organisations, including the MOE, decided to close all of their offices and institutions across the country and implement work-from-home policies on a large scale.

Evidence before the pandemic times suggests that WFH can improve life and work in several ways (Weitzer et al., 2021). Not only that, more exciting findings from the other past research found that WFH can also help to mitigate the negative effects of social isolation, as well as work-family and work-life balance conflicts (Contreras et al., 2020). WFH allows employees more flexibility in dealing with family matters because they can work from anywhere and everywhere, strengthening the family environment and allowing them to coordinate the autonomy of time management and their personal and work tasks. However, all these good consequences need great pay. All those positive consequences will be demonstrated only if employees receive good leadership support (Irwanto et.al., 2021).

Considering the importance of leadership support for employees in implementing WFH, this study was designed to determine to what extent the effect of e-leadership on the employee work motivation who have implemented WFH during a crisis. This study focuses on e-leadership implemented by middle leaders. Middle leaders in the MOE are members of a managerial and professional group who hold positions such as Deputy Director or Chief Assistant Director.

When discussing the role of a leader in an educational institution, including crisis research, all previous studies usually only involved the director, principal, and headmaster (De Nobile, 2018) and very little research is conducted on middle leaders, despite the fact that the roles of middle leaders are critical for all organisations. Middle leaders, according to Malik et al (2011), are constantly under stress from both sides, with lower leaders complaining, pressing, and demanding resources and rewards, while senior management is giving tough deadlines due to the industry's cutthroat competition. Furthermore, this study also choose crises as a focus of study because, in the context of HRD, Raka (2019) agreed that research on leaders in crisis management in HRD academic discipline is still underexplored when compared to other academic disciplines such as management and psychology.

Research Question and Research Objective

This study was conducted to answer the research question as follows

RQ: To what extent does e-leadership influence employees' motivation when performing work from home during a crisis?

While also to achieve the following research objective:

RO: To measure e-leadership influences employees' motivation when performing work from home during a crisis.

Literature Review

Crisis and e-leadership

The word crisis refers to the deep value, rational, sound judgments and decisions that a leader needs to immediately undertake, using all the power and knowledge that he possesses (Benaden et al., 2016). In the field of Human Resource Development (HRD), a crisis is defined as an unexpected event that can cause significant changes in many aspects either in terms of individuals or organizations (Wang & Hutchins, 2010). Leadership in organizations requires ability, especially in a crisis environment.

Even if a leader has extensive experience in leadership, it may not work if he or she is unable to handle panic or critical situations during a crisis, as Dirani et al (2020) reported in their study, which stated that news and social media have exposed how some leaders are failing in their efforts to save organisations and jobs during a crisis, and what is missing, is a lack of competencies among leaders to deal with the duration, severity, and duration of the crisis.

Another challenge is when crisis leadership must be implemented through e-leadership. E-Leadership is a leadership strategy that allows leaders to shape leadership through the use of technology. E-leadership necessitates a wide range of abilities. The main role of the leader in any leadership style, including e-leadership, is to achieve the company's mission and vision, guide and motivate his team, and empower employees to achieve the organization's goals. In this regard, leaders who practise e-leadership face unique challenges, particularly during crises, because they must meet the same key performance indicators as those set by the organisation when practising face-to-face leadership (Iriqat & Khalaf, 2017). Some leaders are not able to use their ability to influence others in an electronic setting.

Employee Work Motivation

Motivation is a need-satisfying process, which means that when certain factors meet a person's needs, they will make every effort to achieve their goals with the best possible results. Maslow (1943) proposed five human needs that must be met in order to increase motivation which are physiological, security, social, self-esteem, and self-actualization.

In the organization, increasing employee work motivation, commitment and engagement levels are key organizational aspects nowadays. According to Gibson et.al (2011), employee work motivation is defined as an employee's attitude toward work situations in their organisation. Those who can adapt and satisfy with their work situation will have high work motivation, while those who have a negative perception about their work situation will have low work motivation. Employees who are highly motivated at work tend to deliver excellent results.

Many factors can affect an employee's work motivation. One of the factors is social context (Anwar & Shukur, 2015). This context consists of organizational values and culture but it also includes leadership and management as well as the influence of the group or team in which a person works.

Methodology

The researcher used the quantitative research method to collect data through a survey. The data was analysed using descriptive analysis which is frequency and percentage to describe the respondents' demography and simple linear regression analysis to determine whether the implementation of e-leadership among middle leaders during the crisis have influenced employee in term of their work motivation. A p-value of <.05 signifies that the effect is

significant. On the other hand, a p-value of $>.05$ signifies that the effect is not significant. The data was analysed by using the current version of SPSS software.

The survey questionnaire was adapted from an earlier study conducted by (Cabrera, 2022). The questionnaire was divided into two (2) sections. The first section contained the demographic information of the respondents and the second section contained the questions of the related variable. The validity of the instrument was made by involving 3 experts while the reliability of the instrument was tested through the implementation of a pilot test. Nunally and Bernstein (1994) argue that values of reliability coefficients above 0.6 are acceptable and considered.

The total population is 124 employees who have experience WFH setup during a crisis with supervision from their middle leader. This total of 124 employees is from three (3) departments under MOE. From 124 of the total population, 94 samples were drawn by using a simple random sampling method. The sample was calculated using Raosoft Sample Calculator. The questionnaire was distributed to all respondents online via Google Forms.

Data Analysis

The data sample used met the assumption for performing regression analysis, that is, the sample data was drawn at random and met the condition of data normality. The following is the hypothesis that has been developed:

Research Hypothesis

H0: there is no significant relation between e-leadership and employee work motivation while working from home during a crisis.

H1: there is a significant relation between e-leadership and employee work motivation while working from home during a crisis.

Table 1

Demographic of Respondents (n = 94)

Demographic Characteristic	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	42	44.7
Female	52	55.3
Years of Service in MOE		
Less than 1 year	6	6.4
1 year	11	11.7
2 years	31	33
3 years	33	35.1
4 years and above	13	13.8

Table 4.1 shows the demographic background of the respondent. Of the total of 94 respondent, 42 (44.7%) is male and the rest 52 (55.3%) is female. The majority of respondents have been working for around 2-3 years (68.1%) with their current department.

Table 2

The Influence of E-Leadership on Employee’s Work Motivation

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t-value	p-value.	Interpretation
		B	Std. Error	Beta			
1	(Constant)	3.470	.208		16.717	.000	
	E-Leadership	.286	.043	.570	6.655	.000	Significant
$R^2 = 0.325$							

Note: a. Dependent Variable: Work Motivation

Table 4.2 the regression matrix showing e-leadership as a predictor variable of work motivation. The result shows that the value of $p < 0.05$ ($p = 0.0000$), proved that e-leadership positively and significantly affects work motivation. Therefore, H1 is accepted while H0 is rejected. The regression coefficient value (R Square) for these two variables is 0.325. This means that the e-leadership variable contributes up to 32.5% of the change in the dependent variable, which is employee motivation. E-leadership was assessed as a predictor of work motivation and employee performance in terms of strategic leadership, digital savvy and individualised consideration for their employees. The findings leads to the conclusion that, as the quality of e-leadership improves, so will employees work motivation. Furthermore, when employees are satisfied with management's e-leadership, they are motivated to do a good job.

Discussion

According to the findings of this study, e-leadership has a positive and significant impact on employee work motivation. This supports the claim that as the quality of e-leadership improves, so will employee work motivation. Furthermore, when employees are pleased with the e-leadership of the middle leaders, they are more motivated to perform well, even in crises. This finding is consistent with previous research such as Basu (2022); Wolor et al (2020); Hena & Gupta (2015), who believe that e-leadership, like face-to-face leadership, also can influence employee motivation and participation in company activities.

Because the findings show that e-leadership has an impact on employee motivation, middle leaders who implement this type of leadership, particularly during times of crisis, must ensure that they can manage their subordinates efficiently through a virtual medium in order to avoid having a negative impact on their subordinates' motivation. Patsorn (2021) found that reading non-verbal responses of employees is challenging in a virtual work setting. Other than that, there are numerous other challenges that leaders may face when implementing e-leadership during a crisis, such as failing to communicate a problem or not having enough information to make an informed decision (Mohd & Rami, 2022). Taking into account all these challenges, middle leaders must develop specific skills to master the competencies in conducting e-leadership. Middle leaders must always believe that the great leaders are concerned with

connecting with the people they lead and always inspiring their subordinates with various relevant strategies.

Besides the middle leaders itself, an organizations also must constantly monitor and assist middle leaders in improving their competencies in implementing e-leadership, particularly in times of crisis. An organisation must consider e-leadership when planning future courses or training. An organization must aware regarding the importance of understanding e-leadership in the context of crises among their leaders is important, considering that normal situations and crisis usually demands a different job scope from leaders. In today's VUCA world, crises can occur at any time and in a variety of ways. As a result, every organisation must prepare its leaders to always be effective in leading subordinates, even when a crisis occurs. In today's uncertain world, the need for e-leadership to be implemented on a large scale in organisations when a crisis strikes is not excluded, so it is an organization's obligation to ensure that e-leadership also becomes one of the main focuses in developing human resources in their organisation.

Conclusion and Limitation

The study reveals that e-leadership has a notable and favorable influence on employee work motivation. The outcome indicates that the statistical significance is evident with a p-value of less than 0.05 ($p=0.0000$), affirming that e-leadership significantly and positively impacts work motivation. Additionally, the regression coefficient value (R Square) indicates that the variable of e-leadership accounts for approximately 32.5% of the variation in employee motivation. These findings imply that enhancing the quality of e-leadership will lead to a corresponding improvement in employees' work motivation.

Based on these results, it is suggested that organizations focus on enhancing e-leadership practices to foster higher levels of employee motivation. This can be achieved through measures such as providing effective virtual communication channels, promoting regular feedback and recognition, offering clear and achievable goals, and fostering a supportive and collaborative virtual work environment. By investing in these areas, organizations can maximize the positive impact of e-leadership on employee motivation, thereby enhancing overall productivity and job satisfaction.

This study, however, has a limitation. The research is confined to the MOE department. Therefore, we encourage future researchers to replicate this study with different populations to enhance and broaden the existing literature. Additionally, we also encourage future researchers to explore the influence of e-leadership on other dependent variables, such as employee job performance, organizational performance, and more.

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