A SUCCESSFUL LEADERSHIP: PREFERABLE LEADERSHIP STYLES AMONG SENIOR MANAGERS IN MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

Leaders are of critical importance to cultivating an organizational culture that promotes employee productivity and contributes to organizational performance. One of the most crucial aspects of leadership is communication which is a complex process within an organization. Based on the five focus groups interviewed from public and private sectors organizations in Malaysia, the questions about their preferred leadership styles were answered evidently. The finding indicated that the senior managers in both sectors preferred to have leaders who are *understanding, facilitative, knowledgeable,* and *participative*. These dimensions were also founding to be associated with *communication, organizational performance,* and *employee motivation*. However, in this case, *charismatic style* which known as popular leadership style was no longer an important dimension for the preferred style of leadership in Malaysia. Furthermore, this study managed to provide some viewpoints of the qualities much needed by the leadership sight.

Keywords: organizational communication, leadership style, employee performance, motivation

1.0 Overview and Problem Statement

This study is about leadership styles and the effect on employee's performance where purposely focused on employees. Regardless of the type and sector of the organizations, communication styles among leaders and employees' job performance are related, and the goal of effective communication among managerial should be a purpose that drives the organization.

Successful communication in the organization is a means of bringing about successful workplace growth (Darkow, 2015) and increased performance of all parties involved in the communication process (Turaga, 2016) through improving how individuals in the organization talk, interpret, and make sense of situations. Effective communication among leaders is essential for accomplishing tasks in the organizations (Leonard, 2004). not just involve words to influence people, but a set of combined skills including non-verbal communication, engaged listening, the ability to communicate effectively, and the capacity to recognize (Alice & Brian, 2016) and understand employees emotions and those of the person involved in communication.

The current study draws on the importance factors, functions, and effects of leaders' communication styles specifically from the perspective of Malaysian middle management. Whether planning and organizing or leading and monitoring, middle managers communicate with and through other people. This implies that every person's communication skills affect personal and organizational effectiveness (Ahyia & Agyin, 2016). For communication to be effective, leaders and their 'back bones' (middle management) need to consider the backgrounds and

experiences of those they communicate with. Leaders need to know the middle managers to have effective communication with them while the same holds true for other employees.

According to Tourish, (2014) the accomplishment of an organization task does not only rely on how the organization employs its human capital but also on how it motivate to increase their performance. Hence, the major challenge for Malaysian organizations is to produce more leaders with the characteristics of leadership in all aspects and go about to tackle factors to rise performance. Extensive research is available in the literature investigating the meaning of leadership, the styles of leadership and what is the organizational communication with the two concepts – leadership styles and employees' performance. This paradigm seems to have been examined almost independently (Lo, Ramayah, Min, & Songan, 2010); that is, little research need to be done to confirm the relationship between leadership and employees performance in the organizations intentionally in the Malaysian context.

The major concern in this study is to identify the preferable leadership styles in the Malaysian workplace and to confirm factors that contribute to employee's performance. Based on these objectives, the questions that are to be addressed are:

1- What is the most preferable effective leadership style from the perspective of middle management in Malaysia?
2- To what extent does the leadership styles affect employee's performance? Have their current practices significantly moderated the best communication styles and successfully leading employees' performance?

2.0 Literature Reviews

2.1 Leadership
Leadership is a fundamental element of the human condition. Leadership can be defined in many ways. For more decades, researchers have tried to define leadership and there have been many discussions on the definition of leadership, however they do not come to an agreement (B. Bass, 2000). Some of the definitions of leadership include coaching, inspiring, directing, guiding, supporting and motivating people in the organization (Howard, 2005). Leadership also defined as a process 'influence' between leaders and employees where a leader attempts to influence the behavior of employees to achieve the organizational goals (Voon, Lo, Ngui, & Ayob, 2011). Leadership with great communication is also able to influence a group towards the achievement of a vision or set of goals (McKenna & Rooney, 2008).

2.2 Leadership Styles
Leadership styles could be explained on a scale ranging from autocratic through democratic to participative to show the degree of authority and decision making power of leaders and employees (Anwar, Haider, & Iqbal, 2015). This study therefore uses a Path Goal Leadership Theory as a framework to expand understanding of the topic. Generally, PGT offers a large-scale assessment of how leaders can motivate employees to achieve goals and to enhance employee performance by focusing on the motivating factors. Theoretically, PGT suggests that a leader needs to choose a 'leadership style' that suits the needs of employees, environment, and the tasks they are doing.

There are four kinds of leader styles based on PGT by House & Mitchell, (1975) included directive; participative; supportive; and achievement-Oriented leader.

Directive Style
Directive style is a manager who lets employees know what is expected for them, gives specific guidance as to what should be done, makes his or her part in the group understood, schedules work on what to be done, maintains definite standards of performance and asks that group members follow standard rules and regulations in order.

Participative style
Participative style, is a manager who consults with employees, solicits their suggestions, and takes these suggestions seriously into consideration before making a decision.

Supportive style
Supportive style is characterized as a friendly and approachable manager who shows concern, well-being and needs of subordinate employees. Such a manager does little things to make the work more pleasant and treats members as equally (fairness).

Achievement-oriented Style
Achievement-oriented leaders sets challenging goals, expects employees to perform at their highest level continuously seeks improvement in performance and show a high degree of confidence that the employees will assume responsibility to accomplish challenging goals.

As this study focuses on leadership communication style in the Malaysian workplace, Jogulu & Ferkins (2012) investigated linking leadership communication with transformational and transactional leadership style to the Malaysian cultural environment. Ansari, Ahmad, & Aafaqi (2004) proposed a transitional model of leadership that is based on the watch-and-win principle, calling it the nurturant-task style of leadership to address the issue of organizational communication in the Malaysian context. They believed that organizations should prepare normative structures and set clear goals to develop employee performance to the organization.

Besides transformational leadership styles, Jamal & Abu Bakar, (2015) have mentioned in their study that charismatic leadership also contributed to organizational reputation effectively to mitigate the crisis impact and strengthen organizational. In this context, transformational style defined as leadership that motivates and appeals to followers' ideals and moral values to do more. Transformational Leaders look to inspire, to set direction and vision, to empower subordinates to participate and take the initiative in changing the organization. Transformational Leaders are also charismatic leaders that lead, inspire, and improve behavior and productivity (B. M. Bass & Riggio, 2006).

Conversely, Burns (1978) who pioneered the study of transactional leadership indicated that transactional leaders are those who sought to motivate followers by appealing to their self-interests. According to Bass and Avolio (1994), transactional leaders employ three factors: (1) contingent reward (2) management-by-exception active and (3) management-by-exception passive. In contingent re- wards, leaders provide followers with material and psychological rewards contingent on the fulfillment of contractual obligations. Bass (1985) emphasized that by providing contingent rewards, a transactional leader might inspire a reasonable degree of involvement, loyalty, commitment, and performance from subordinates. On the other hand, management-by-exception is whereby the leader is vigilant and ensures that followers meet

predetermined standards. In management-by-exception passive, leader intervenes with followers only after non- compliance of standards has occurred or when mistakes have already happened. However, finding that Malaysian organizational leaders are more transactional, delegate less and talk in a way that is 'straight to the point.'

2.3 Organizational Communication

Different scholars have defined organizational communication in different ways. Some researchers concluded organizational communication is a process of creating, exchanging, interpreting, and storing messages and information within a system of human interrelationships in an organization. In seeking to specify a role for organizational communication, Barbour & Lammers (2007) defined organizations (institutions) as "groups of established practices guided by formalized, rational beliefs that transcend particular organizations and situations" (p. 364). Probably one of the most widely accepted intentions about organizational communication is the existence of a positive association between a leader's communication influence and an employee's performance and satisfaction in the workplace.

Organizational communication covers a mix of approaches, theories, and methodologies developed within organizational settings or applied from other areas. It is focused on groups of individuals working together in a coordinated way in pursuit of production-related goals (Jones, Watson, Gardner, & Gallois, 2004). Over the years, various studies have concluded that the involvement of leaders to build the right communication strategies, training, and infrastructure is needed to avoid a complicated system of communication (Delcambre 2010). The styles, honesty, rewards, good relationships, trust, and open communication within organizations affect performance.

To meet organizational communication clearly, it is generally defined as a process through which people acting together, create meaning, sustain and manage meanings by verbal and non-verbal signs and symbols within a particular context (Nabie & Ome, 2016). In these particular contexts, organizational communication is seen as a set of people working together in an effort to achieve shared goals (Zaremba, 2003). Zaremba (2003) further added organizational communication is the process whereby members gather relevant information about the progress of the organization and the changes occurring within it.

2.4 Employees Performance

The concept of 'performance' means the factors related to the workplace environment that are being provided by the employer to their employees that could support the employees' performance at work. Having high performing employees will increase the levels of corporate productivity and thus increase the organization's profit (Lunenburg 2011). Effective collaboration between leaders and middle managers encourages a positive relationship with regard to work attitudes and the engagement of employees for the purpose of enhancing their performances (Zorn, Roper, and Richardson 2014). Employees' performance is dependent on the quality of the employees' working environment based on management support, teamwork, workplace environment, peer relationships, and job tasks (Naharuddin & Sadegi, 2013).
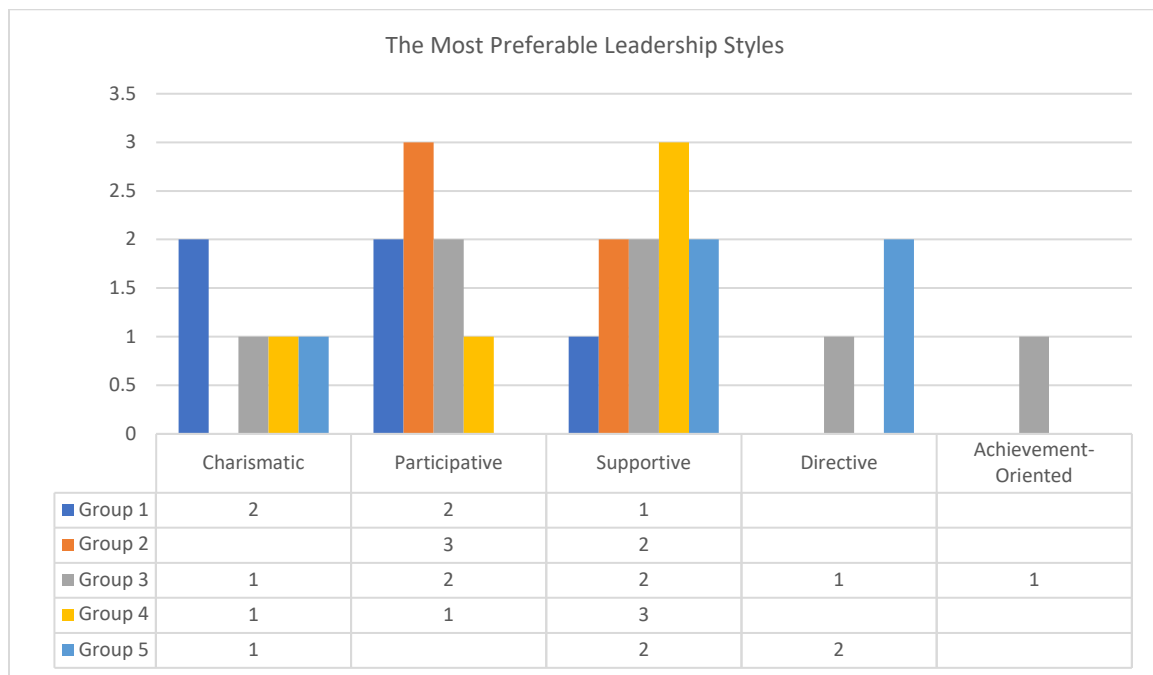
3.0 Methodology

To identify the preferred leadership styles as well as the factors that influence employees' performance along with communication, the following research method was employed. All the participants in the study represent middle management such as Senior Executives, Assistant

Special Managers, and Managers from various industries such as telecommunications, banking, and the service sector in both public and private organizations in Klang Valley area, Malaysia. Five focus group (FG) discussions joined the research project with five to seven participants each bringing the total number to 27 individuals.

The main aim of using this method is to help this study to provide information about a range of ideas and feelings that individuals have about certain issues, as well as illuminating the differences in perspective between groups of individuals (Rabiee, 2004). When trying to evaluate organizational communication, capture challenges and issues, or understand concepts and processes; focus groups are ideal to expand understanding on effective communication in organizations. This approach helps to answer the questions of 'why' and 'how' asked in the study. Another advantage of utilizing focus groups is that "*the researcher gets the respondents to interact with each other in a way that reveals additional information*" (Sim, 1998).

4.0 Results

To answer the first question on *what is the most preferable effective leadership style from the perspective of middle management in Malaysia?* – all the participants indicated how they were understood the view and meaning of leadership styles. Column 4.1 below shows the most preferable styles chose by the middle managers in our country.

The Most Preferable Leadership Styles

	Charismatic	Participative	Supportive	Directive	Achievement-Oriented
Group 1	2	2	1		
Group 2		3	2		
Group 3	1	2	2	1	1
Group 4	1	1	3		
Group 5	1		2	2	

Column 4.1: The Most Preferable Leadership Styles

Based on the above column, supportive and participative styles were participants most preferrable leadership styles. 10 out of 27 participants chose supportive and eight chose participative style. However, charismatic style has collected as third preferable and the lesser was achievement-oriented. When the study asked why, they prefer to choose a leader who is always

with them in carrying out the tasks rather than a leader who are only gives them instructions and put high expectations but, does not help in the process of achieving goals.

Second question to explore - *what extent does the leadership styles affect employee's performance? Have their current practices significantly moderated the best communication styles and successfully leading employees' performance?* However, all the participants gave study the great responses. It is evident in the previous reviews that employee's performance to achieve organizations goals was related to the leadership style employed by the leader. The study can confirm, it is directly affecting employee performance, actions, and emotions. Interestingly, a few participants exposed that they 'don't mind' if their leader does not practice one of the styles - *"Work is still work. I need to do and finish it. Although my boss did not contribute much, but still… I have to get things done"* – Azli.

The study also entails what leaders should do as their added values - this is a focus on achieving goals, understanding why organization members need to communicate effectively, and taking initiative and responsibility for achieving success. During communication between leaders and middle managers, discussing 'what we want' helps them understand how to accomplish the tasks. The study describes, *"Some top bosses, they give you A but expect you to complete the job until Z"*- Baseerah. To do this, leader and middle managers must talk about expectations. Missing important discussion points will possibly contribute to different ways of thinking and meaning.

For this, communication play a vital role to implement all organizational vision and missions. The study also expands the results on how well our leaders communicate that affects to the productions and employee's satisfaction. The pie chart below explains only 8% (eight percent) leaders practicing good communication and trying to communicate effectively within the organizations. The rest shows that our top leaders need extra work to help their organization to perform well. Middle managers need some one who *walk the talk* and that way leader can lead by example to inspire and motivate their employee. As one of the participants said, *"Great leaders are those who do not have double standard and walk the talk"* – Balqis

How well do organizational leaders communicate?

■ Very Well ■ Good ■ Fair ■ Poor

8%

22%

33%

37%
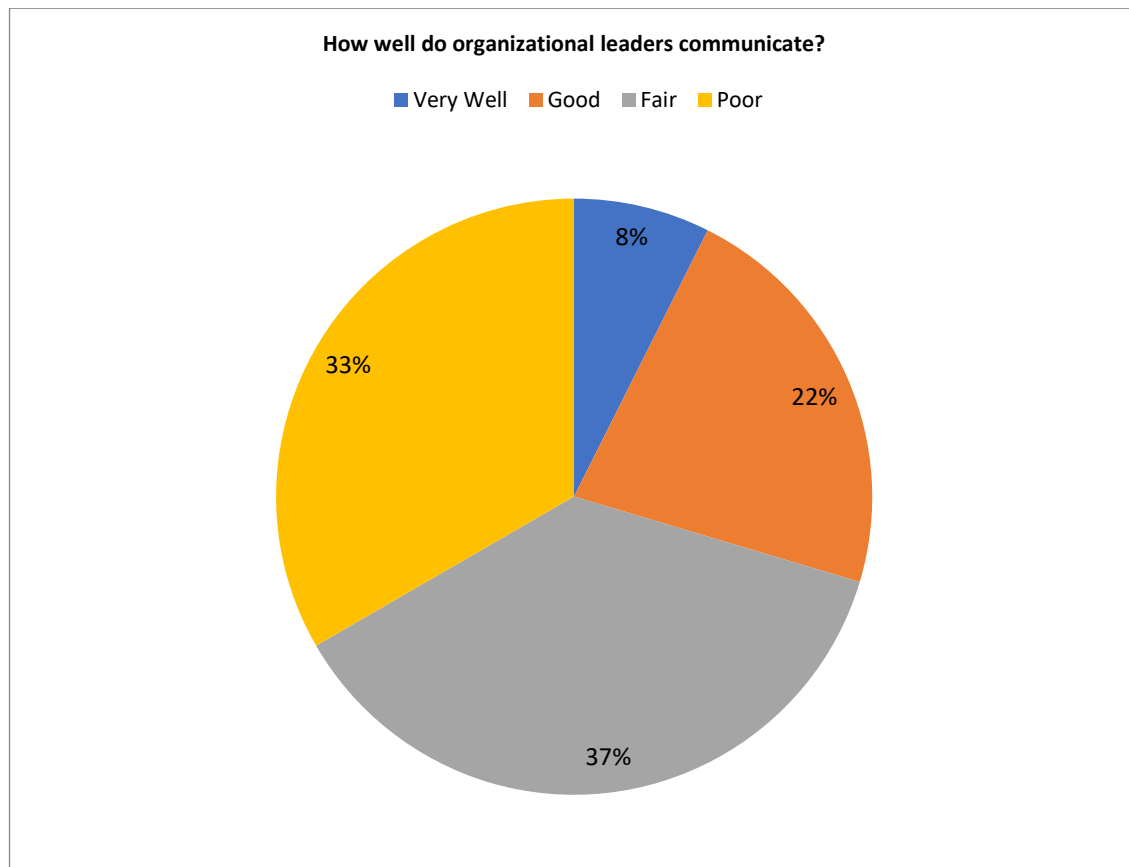
Pie Chart 4.1: How Well Leaders Communicate

5.0 Conclusion

Based on the results, supportive and participative leadership styles have a significant positive impact on middle managers performance in Malaysia. Therefore, Malaysian leaders are encouraged to practice supportive style and involve team members in decision-making, more concern, friendly and well-being. Achievement-oriented style, however, shows a significant negative impact on employees' performance and unfavorable style. This indicates that, assertive way and other styles would not help to increase employee's performance. Even Malaysia leaders prefer and known leading through autocratic or achievement-oriented style, in the view of new generation this style may no longer be acceptable (Basit, Sebastian, & Hassan, 2018).

As well as charismatic style, although, Jamal & Abu Bakar, (2015) found charismatic leadership contributed to organizational reputation, however, this study has collected that charismatic is no longer important element among middle managers. This study identified only on preferable leadership styles among middle managers in Malaysia and other outcomes may be relevant to our study. Further study needs to be carried to explore in depth the relationship between unchosen styles towards employee's performance purposely in the Malaysian context. A comparative study of leadership styles between the results obtained from different level of management might produce a better understanding of how employee's performance could be further increased harmoniously.

In term of communication relation, leaders can be supported by more specific communication assessment of their strengths. Others may include communication training

development to enhance their skills, provide the basis for a more objective dialogue between leaders – middle managers, have more face-to-face meeting and practice two-way communication. With effective communication, it can be benefited to the employees for long-term relationships, teamwork, and cooperation. The organizations compulsory to have a highly capable leaders to lead their employees for both private and public sectors in Malaysia. Organizations with good leadership styles will further increase performance. Therefore, high attention should be given to place leadership issues in urgency.

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