

LEADERSHIP PRACTICES OF DEPARTMENTAL HEADS IN MALAYSIAN PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES

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A university in the new millennium is in a state of flux. In this new paradigm, public universities are emulating the private sector in adopting business approach to create a market niche. Thus, the needs for new and effective model of leadership practices particularly at Malaysian academic department level, as the traditional leadership practices have become inadequate in aligning the national vision. Despite the importance of department heads' leadership role in universities, there is hardly any guideline, grounded on firm theoretical foundations, to be used in leadership development program for academic administration. The purpose of this research was to investigate the relationship between department head leadership behavior and subordinates' organizational commitment. A total of 430 academic staffs from Malaysian public universities were randomly selected to participate on this study. Finding of this study provide evidence to suggest that encouraging the heart of leadership behavior from Kouzes & Posner's Transformational Leadership accounting for 55 percents direct positive relationship to academic staffs' organizational commitment. In summary, the model seems to offer construct validity and intuitive appeal for application in Malaysian academic setting were the department heads should indeed lead as Kouzes & Posner suggested by encouraging the heart.

Introduction

The impact of globalization urgently requires a transformation in higher education system. These changes will require the successful translation of long-range strategic plans into closely coordinated actions. The future economic, social, and spiritual well-being of our nation depends critically on the success of this transformation, as human capital is the driving force behind the new economic model. The economic repercussions of failure cannot be underestimated. In our region alone, South Korea, Singapore, and China continue to make great strides in reinventing their leading institutions and higher education systems in general. This phenomenon has prompted the Malaysian government to initiate the establishment of Ministry of Higher Education solely to fulfil the goal of making Malaysia the centre of regional excellence in the provision of world class higher education in the year 2020 as mentioned in the Education Act (Amendment 1996 and The Corporatisation Policy in 1998). However, universities do not change easily, especially the type of change that requires restructuring management processes and modifying traditional notions about academic leadership (Munitz, 1995).

Leadership in higher education is considered a critical component in today's universities, but what makes a leader successful? Hyatt (2007) suggests subordinate's perception is important to leader identification and leader's influence potential. According to Kouzes (2002), when people work with leaders who care about them and encourage their hearts, they feel better about themselves and perform at significantly higher levels. Leadership influences organizational commitment (Porter *et al.*, 1976); Glisson & Durick, 1988; Zeffane, 1994; Lowe & Barnes, 2002).

Background of the Problem

Leadership practices play a significant role in the success of an organization. To understand the importance of leadership practices, it is necessary to first understand the history of how styles and theories of leadership have evolved over time. The history of leadership goes back to the pre-industrial period when traditional authority was enforced by establishing rules that employees obeyed because they felt compelled to obey the rules (Gannon, 1982). Leaders in higher education are challenged with balancing administrative control and faculty autonomy while creating an open and welcoming atmosphere for students to learn: not an easy task for the most educated, developed, and experienced leader (Brown & Moshavi, 2002). Add in the increasing paradigm of consumerism in higher education, coupled with the increase in technological innovation and utilization, as well as accreditation and financing issues, it is clear that higher education needs individuals with the knowledge, skills, and abilities to lead in an era of uncertainty and change (Tierney, 1999).

The role of public universities is moving away from being largely social and educational in nature to an economic model (Alfred & Roosevelt, 2000; Bailey, 2002; Bergquist, 1998; Pusser, 2002; and Tierney, 2004). Levin (2002) contends the shift is supported by empirical evidence in the characterization of the role of the institution. With universities constantly adapting to this reality, it can be argued that senior and middle academic administrators are becoming increasingly removed from core operations such as instruction, more strategic in their approach and more connected to a larger system (Levin, 2002). Universities now require leaders, who thrive on the challenge of change; who foster environments of innovation; that encourage trust and learning; and who lead themselves, their constituents, and their units, departments, and universities successfully into the future (Brown, 2001).

Selecting as academic leaders always facing much problems due to the lack of viable candidates, more and more administrative positions are being filled by those who are not prepared sufficiently for the complex job. To add to the difficulties of academic leadership, academic administrators are usually not chosen based solely on their leadership knowledge, skills, or abilities. As few academic administrators possess the entire catalogue of leadership traits that the experts suggest exemplary leaders should have, most are chosen because of their intellect, research abilities, and notoriety in their specific field (Gilley, 2003). This knowledge does not necessarily equate to effective leadership and the wisdom that effective leadership necessitates (Bass, 1990)

Department heads in public universities are often seen as the building block of academic leadership. They are the leaders who are in direct contact with faculty, staff, and students on a daily basis. Department heads have been described as the most important administrators at the university (Gmelch, 2004). Their impact is correlated with their influence on faculty and students regarding teaching and research, which are the core functions of the university (Bisbee, 2005). The responsibilities of a department head include, but are not limited to: departmental affairs, academic affairs, faculty affairs, student affairs, external communications, budgetary affairs, office management, space management, and fundraising (Hecht, 2004). Department heads function as leaders when they focus on key aspects of organizational culture: mission, vision, engagement, and adaptability (Bowman, 2002). This dual responsibility of being both a manager and leader of students and staff can become a heavy load, particularly if the department head is not suited for a position like this because of his or her lack of training in administrative issues and responsibilities. Many resort to focusing only on the managerial functions in order to keep the department functioning on a daily basis (Hecht, 2004).

In another scenario, academic staff's psychological impacts such as organizational commitment considered as significant indicator of measuring leadership capabilities among academic leaders. Academic staff's organizational commitment has attracted interest because of its attempt to understand the intensity and stability of academic staff's dedication to work organizations (Eisenberger, Fasolo, & Davis-LaMastro, 1990). An employee's commitment is a concern to all organizations because it has been linked to reduced turnover (Mathieu & Zajac, 1990), increased knowledge sharing (Alvesson, 2001). Therefore, high level of employee or subordinates' organizational commitment, coupled with transformational leadership practice has the potential to improve collective employee performance within organizations.

Research Objectives and Hypotheses

The following objectives comprised the basis of the study:

1. Is there any significant relationship between transformational leadership behaviours (challenging the process, inspiring a shared vision, enabling others to act, modelling the way and encouraging the heart) with academic staff's organizational commitment?
2. What are the transformational leadership behaviours of departmental heads' contribute towards academic staff's organizational commitment?

H₀1: There is no significant relationship between academic staff's perception of departmental heads' transformational leadership behaviour (challenging the

process, inspiring a shared vision, enabling others to act, modelling the way and encouraging the heart) with organizational commitment.

H₀2: Academic staff's perception of departmental heads' transformational leadership behaviours (challenging the process, inspiring a shared vision, enabling others to act, modelling the way, encouraging the heart) do not significantly contribute to the relationship towards academic staff's organizational commitment, overall job satisfaction and job performance.

Methodology

The quantitative research is noted in the post-positivist paradigm which is meant to develop confidence that the knowledge claim about the phenomenon is true or false by collecting evidence in the form of objective observations of relevant phenomenon (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2003). Post-positivist researchers expand scientific research to include correlation studies, and they acknowledge that all research variables cannot be controlled. They also recognize that it is difficult to show a causal effect relationship (Glicken, 2003; Creswell, 2003). This quantitative research was developed from a post-positivist perspective whereby the researcher designed a research study to administer a survey on a sample of population to examine the relationships between the departmental heads' transformational leadership behaviours (challenging the process, inspiring a shared vision, enabling others to act, modelling the way and encouraging the heart) as perceived by the academic staff and their organizational commitment in the Malaysian public universities.

Based on the statistic provided by the Ministry of Higher Education, there were 18 public universities with the population of 20,989 academic staffs. The 18 public universities in Malaysia identified were grouped into four zones based on their geographical location, namely Northern Zone (Universiti Sains Malaysia, Universiti Utara Malaysia, Universiti Darul Iman Malaysia, and Universiti Malaysia Pahang), Centred Zone (Universiti Malaya, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Universiti Islam Antarabangsa Malaysia, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, Universiti Teknologi Mara), Southern Zone (Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Universiti Tun Hussien Onn Malaysia, Universiti Teknikal Melaka Malaysia), Eastern Zone and East Malaysia (Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia, Universiti Malaysia Terengganu, Universiti Malaysia Perlis, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak and Universiti Malaysia Sabah). A total of 500 academic staff were selected using a proportion of 2 % from a sum of population for each zone. Hence, 322 respondents from Centred Zone, 80 respondents from south zone, 97 respondents from north zone and 73 respondents from East Malaysia. To execute this sampling technique, all academic staff in the selected universities were identified and assigned a number from zero to the required number. An arbitrary number was selected from the table of random numbers and the last four digits

were referred. The number that corresponded to the number assigned to the academic staff in the universities was selected. This was done repeatedly until the desired number of staff had been selected for the sample from that university.

Analysis of Data

Descriptive Analysis of Respondents' Demographic Variables

The demographic variables were analyzed from three indicators, namely, gender, age and years of service. The results were tabulated and presented for more accessible form of referencing and discussion. Table 4.5 below shows the percentage breakdown of the demographics variables of respondents. Due to the nature of random sampling, almost equal male and female subordinates were involved in the study, with 225 (52.3%) male respondents and 205 (47.7%) female respondents. About 40% of the respondents were from centre zone of Malaysia and more than 70% of them were younger than 45 years old and less than 60% of them have less than 10 years of service. The profile of the respondents appeared to represent the population of this study. This numbers and percentages was representative of the population due to the representative percentage from stratified sample chosen from each stratum.

Table 1 Frequency analysis of the respondents according to demographic variables (N = 430)

Variable	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	225	52.3
Female	205	47.7
University		
North zone	115	26.6
Centre zone	165	38.4
South zone	97	22.6
East zone	53	12.3
Age		
Younger than 45	313	72.8
45 and older	117	27.2
Years of Service		
Less than 10 years	248	57.7
10 Years and more	182	42.3

H₀₁: There is a significant relationship between subordinates' perception on departmental heads' transformational leadership behaviour (challenging the process) and organizational commitment.

For the testing of H_{1A} in this study, the resultant correlation between academic staffs' perception on departmental heads' challenging the process leadership behaviour and organizational commitment was strong and significant with $r(428) = .55, p < .001$, two tails. H_{01A} was thus rejected and this implies that H_{1A} is supported and it can be concluded that subordinates' perception on departmental heads' challenging the process leadership behaviour has a strong and significant positive relationship with organizational commitment.

Table 2 Significance of correlation and decision to support/refute hypotheses on organizational commitment

Transformational Leadership Dimensions	Organizational Commitment	
	<i>r</i>	<i>P</i>
Challenging the process	.55	.001
Inspiring a shared vision	.62	.001
Enabling others to act	.55	.001
Modelling the way	.59	.001
Encouraging the heart	.65	.001
Transformational Leadership Behaviours	.70	.001

Prediction of Academic Staff's Organizational Commitment

In order to answer research question two and evaluate research hypothesis H₂, the multiple regression equation, together with the evaluation of the significance of the unstandardized regression coefficients (B) and standardized regression coefficients or beta weights (β) of the independent variables obtained for organizational commitment, overall job satisfaction and job performance were presented. In standard multiple

regression, each independent variable is evaluated of its predicted power, over and above that offered by all other independent variables. It also evaluates the unique variance in the dependent variable after controlling the effects of other independent variables on the dependent variables.

H₂ posited that departmental heads’ transformational leadership behaviours (challenging the process, inspiring a shared vision, enabling others to act, modelling the way, and encouraging the heart) as perceived by subordinates’ significantly contribute towards academic staffs’ organizational commitment. Specifically, the hypothesis was verified using standard multiple regression.

Table 3 Summary of unstandardized regression coefficients and the beta weights of predictors for organizational commitment (N = 430)

Predictors	B	SE	β	T	Sig
Challenging the process	.15*	.06	.13	2.68	.008
Inspiring a shared vision	.22*	.09	.14	2.43	.015
Enabling others to act	.30**	.07	.19	4.36	.000
Modeling the way	.16*	.08	.11	2.17	.031
Encouraging the heart	.34**	.07	.29	5.23	.000

R = .72
R² = .52
F = 90.58 (p < .001)

B: Unstandardized regression coefficients
β: Beta weights
SE: Standard Error
** p < .001 * p < .05

Multiple Linear Regression Equation for Organizational Commitment

Based on the B values in Table 4.19, the multiple linear regression equation that related the organizational commitment to the independent variables derived is,

$$Y = A + B_1X_1 + B_2X_2 + B_3X_3 \dots + B_iX_i$$

$$\text{Organizational Commitment} = -.34 + .15(\text{Challenging the process}) + .22(\text{Inspiring a shared vision}) + .30(\text{Enabling others to act}) + .16(\text{Modelling the way}) + .34(\text{Encouraging the heart})$$

where .15 was the B for challenging the process, .22 was the B for inspiring a shared vision, .30 was the B for enabling others to act, .16 was the B for modelling the way and .34 was the B for encouraging the heart. When the equation was standardized, it is given by:

$$Z_Y = \beta_1 z_1 + \beta_2 z_2 + \beta_3 z_3 + \dots \beta_i z_i$$

$Z_{\text{organizational commitment}} = .13(\text{Challenging the process}) + .14(\text{Inspiring a shared vision}) + .19(\text{Enabling others to act}) + .11(\text{Modeling the way}) + .29(\text{Encouraging the heart})$

From the β value, for instance, it could be interpreted that one unit difference between values in challenging the process leadership behaviour with all other variables held constant would be associated with a difference in Z_Y of .13 units. Similarly, comparable differences in enabling others to act and encouraging the heart leadership behaviours would be associated with a difference of .19 and .29 units in Z_Y respectively.

Discussion and Conclusion

Leadership in the academic world is a unique phenomenon. It is leadership among equals – something which is untenable outside the academia (Palmer, 2008). This presents enormous challenge to the department head, appointed to the position on rotational basis, to take charge over colleagues of equal standings. In this position, the department head cannot assume his word carries authority. He has to win over hearts and minds, be persuasive in his approach, collegial in his dealings, and understand the institutional culture in order to gain compliance. In non-academic organizations, subordinates' compliance is taken for granted – more or less.

From the hypothesis testing conducted using Pearson correlation analysis, it was found that there was a significant relationship between subordinates' perception on departmental heads' challenging the process leadership behaviour and organizational commitment. The strong and significant relationship implied that subordinates who perceived their departmental heads as those who challenge the process tend to show higher organizational commitment. This could be explained by the fact that leaders who practise challenging the process leadership behaviour are committed to experimenting and taking risks and willing to learn from mistakes. Subordinates who are challenged by such leaders to experiment and take risk consider the challenges posed by the departmental heads as essential to help them search for opportunities to change and grow and to improve the organization. This finding supported Kouzes and Posner (2002) that subordinates who are involved with organization decision making which incur challenges have higher levels of organizational commitment. The finding also appeared to support studies by McNeese and Smith (1996), Dum Dum, Lowe and Avolio (2002), Bono and Judge (2003) and Avolio, Zhu, Koh and Bhatia (2004) which found positive relationship between transformational leadership and organizational commitment. __

It was observed that the relationship between subordinates' perception on departmental heads' inspiring a shared vision leadership behaviour and organizational commitment was also supported. The resultant correlation was strong and it indicated that subordinates who rated themselves as being more committed to their organization, tend to have relationship with higher perceptions that their departmental heads' practiced inspiring a shared vision leadership behaviour. Leaders, who are proactive in fostering a shared future that they seek to create, will be likely to encourage the subordinates to envision the future and understand the vision of the organization with a positive and hopeful look. When subordinates are able to have an open and honest communication, they are able to establish trust with the departmental heads and become more committed to their organization. This implies that developing and communicating a shared vision connecting to the organization can lead to feeling of commitment to the organization. This shared vision creates a sense of belonging and togetherness which in turn will increase commitment. This finding supported studies by Dum Dum, Lowe and Avolio (2002), Bono and Judge (2003) and Avolio, Zhu, Koh and Bhatia (2004) which showed significant relationship between inspiring a shared vision and organizational commitment.

It was found that there was a significant relationship between subordinates' perception on departmental heads' enabling others to act leadership behaviour and organizational commitment. The strong and statistically significant relationship indicated that subordinates who rated themselves as being more committed to their organization, tend to have the perceptions that their departmental heads' practiced more enabling others to act leadership behaviour. This finding support the argument that subordinates who are given the opportunity to think in innovative ways and to make decision tend to have higher levels of organizational commitment (Wayne, Liden & Sparrowe, 2000). According to Kouzes and Posner (2002), leaders who practise enabling others to act could foster collaboration by promoting cooperative goals. These leaders tend to encourage others by giving empowerment and freedom of choice for subordinates in the decision-making process. Empowerment helps build organization commitment (Avolio, 1999). Empowerment is important for self-efficacy and encourages positive work experience because leaders who enable the subordinates to make decision help develop their self-concepts and has positive relationship with organization commitment (Tucker & Russell, 2004). In addition, training and resources are made available for subordinates to think and grow and this will encourage more committed in achieving the organization's goals and subordinates will feel supported and self as being part of the organization. Woods (2007) found that enabling others to act correlated the strongest with organizational commitment. The finding also appeared to support studies by Bono and Judge (2003) and Avolio, Zhu, Koh and Bhatia (2004) which found positive relations between enabling others to act with organizational commitment.

Similarly, strong and significant correlation coefficient was obtained between subordinates' perception on departmental heads' modeling the way leadership behaviour and organizational commitment. This relationship implies that subordinates who rated their department heads as practicing more modeling the way of the leadership behaviour

will be likely to observe how their departmental heads do things and understand their departmental heads' values. By following how the departmental heads do their job, the subordinates become more committed in what they are doing. This finding supports finding by Stonestreet (2002) which showed a statistically significant relationship between organizational commitment and all the five types of transformational leadership behaviours.

There was also a significant relationship between subordinates' perception on departmental heads' encouraging the heart leadership behaviour and organizational commitment. This implied that encouraging the heart leadership behaviour is a factor that could influence the Malaysian universities academic staff's organizational commitment. Subordinates were motivated when leaders rewarded and recognized their contributions. In doing so, leaders let subordinates know that they are part of the organization. This finding is parallel to findings by McNeese-Smith (1996) who found significant relationship between each transformational leadership behaviours and organizational commitment, with r values ranging from .28 for inspiring a shared vision to .35 for modeling the way. Dumdum, Lowe and Avolio (2002), and Avolio, Zhu, Koh and Bhatia (2004) also found positive relations between transformational leadership with organizational commitment

This study also found a significant relationship between subordinates' perception on departmental heads' overall transformational leadership behaviours and organizational commitment. This finding concurs with many studies reported in the literature (Avolio, Zhu, Koh & Bhatia, 2004; Bono & Judge, 2003; Emery & Barker, 2007; McCroskey, 2007; Walumbwa et al., 2005). Koh, Steers and Terborg (1995) which found that transformational leadership factors had significant add-on variance in organizational commitment with R^2 change of $p < .001$. Walumbwa, Orwa, Wang and Lawler (2005) in their study on personnel from banking industry in Kenya and US also found that the overall transformational leadership behaviours has a strong and significant relationship with organizational commitment in both countries. Using nurse-managers as samples, Loke (2001) also found significant correlation between the five transformational leadership behaviours and organizational commitment whereas Avolio, Zhu, Koh and Bhatia (2004) found similar significant relationship in their studies that 520 staff nurses were their respondents.

In summary, the five types and overall transformational leadership behaviours have been observed to be correlated with organizational commitment. These results suggest that in an organization where the leaders practice these five types of leadership behaviours, the subordinates will be likely to have higher organizational commitment at work. In other words, the results showed that transformational leadership behaviours such as encouraging the hearts, enabling others to carry out their work, inspiring a shared vision, challenging the process and modeling the way of doing things were able to influence the subordinates' organizational commitment.

Factors Explaining Variance in Organizational Commitment

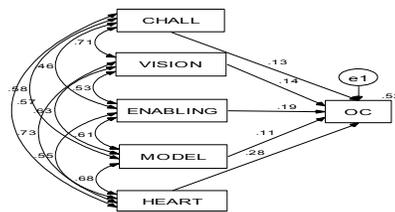


Figure 1: Transformational leadership behaviours and organizational commitment

This means in this study, encouraging the heart and enabling others to act of Malaysia public universities departmental heads' leadership behaviours make the strongest unique contribution to explaining the variance in organizational commitment, when the variance explained by all other variables in the model is controlled for. This implies that the two transformational leadership behaviours are highly predictive of organization commitment.

This finding supports McNeese-Smith's study (1991) which showed that subordinates of the hospital managers who use transformational leadership behaviours tend to show significantly higher levels of organizational commitment. From the regression model, he found that all the variables in the model were the predictors of organizational commitment. The current finding also partially supports a study by Foong (1999) who found that in the regression model, inspiring a shared vision and encouraging the heart together explained about 22% of the variance in organizational commitment. However, this study does not support findings by Gunter (1997) who conducted linear regression and all the five types of the transformational leadership behaviours were significantly related to organizational commitment. Gunter (1997) found that enabling others to act showed the strongest relationship to commitment and inspiring a shared vision showed the weakest relationship to commitment.

In summary, the five types and overall transformational leadership behaviours have been observed to be correlated with organizational commitment. These results suggest that in an organization where the leaders practice these five types of leadership behaviours, the subordinates will be likely to have higher organizational commitment at work. In other words, the results showed that transformational leadership behaviours such as encouraging the hearts, enabling others to carry out their work, inspiring a shared vision, challenging the process and modelling the way of doing things were able to influence the subordinates' organizational commitment.

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