

MALAYSIA LEADERSHIP COMPETENCIES: A MODEL FOR EFFECTIVE PERFORMANCE

KAHIROL MOHD SALLEH & NOR LISA SULAIMAN

Faculty of Technical and Vocational, University Tun Hussein Onn, Johor, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to explore and analyze how organizations in Malaysia could approach improvement by adopting the leadership competency model. By using a modification model from the American Society of Training and Development (ASTD), this paper utilizes the improvement model in its role as a management tool to institute change. It specifically examines the implications of adopting the model within the organization system in Malaysia. With increasing global demand among organizations to become more competitive, Malaysia's organizations must utilize a leader competency model to improve leadership style and use the market-driven organizational approach more. Through the examination of the organization's culture and performance, it has discovered that the leadership and management style has room for improvement in Malaysia.

KEYWORDS: Leadership, Competency Model, Organization Performance, Organization Culture

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia's leadership has changed significantly over the past ten years, moving through the prescribed sequence of an industrial era and into the information and communication technology era. As Malaysia entered the knowledge-based economic era, the trade and industry continued to developed, and the leadership style also changed concurrently. Knowledgeable workers are needed as the nation needs higher-level cognitive skills focused on collaborative problem solving (Abu Hassan Asaari & Karia, 2001). In addition, the leadership also has been affected by the spread of globalization. The global economy is being transformed into a knowledge-based economy, where leadership and technology assume a major role (Malaysian Government, 2006). In order for an organization to excel, it needs its leader to take on new styles and competencies of leadership that positively affect the type of quality shown by the leader. Organizations have invested significant resources in the training and development of its leaders to enhance the competencies, quality, efficiency, effectiveness, and productivity of organizations (Ladyshefsky, 2007).

In order to develop better leaders in the future, it is important to know the qualities and competencies needed. Many studies and research have been done that critique the qualities and competencies in leadership from various perspectives (McLagan, 1983; Rothwell, 1996; Smith, 2008). Most of the studies are done in domestic settings such as what the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) had done within the United States' settings. It is important, also, to see how this competency model can be adopted and adapted to different settings such as in Malaysia. Hence, commonly-accepted leadership theories from the west, and how it is thought to affect other organizational behavior factors, may not be directly transferable to the Malaysian context (Yiing & KamarulZaman, 2009). It is important to understand that this competency model can be used to determine a leadership style and quality. A competency model also has been used as an assessment tool distinguishes qualities in leadership styles. In justifying what the attributes and qualities of the new style of leadership are, it is also important to know the organization's culture and working environment. Leadership theories across cultures suggest that leadership practices are culturally bound (Alves et al., 2006). Consequently, leaders need to embed the local culture that gear to the organization environment and make sure that

employees can adjust their work climate. A good leader will take advantage and turn into a change agent to fully utilize the external environment and drive the organizations performance. There are many approaches that can be used to access leadership competencies, one of the best advances are using the leadership competency model. Together with the competency model, organizations also need to reform its leadership style from transactional leadership towards becoming more transformational in their leadership.

Thus, the challenges facing Malaysian leadership competency, especially in organization and human resource development aspects, can only be properly addressed on the basis of a thorough understanding of the reforms needed. There are different ways in which people see these leadership competency changes influencing human resource development and transferring good working synergy to the organization's system. One way to see how these leadership competencies are put into action is by looking through the lens of organizational change. In this paper the leadership competencies are viewed from some theoretical perspective in Malaysia's organizational settings.

LEADERSHIP COMPETENCIES MODEL

Malaysia needs to look forward in ways to overcome the strength of the leadership competencies by adopting and adapting the competency model concept. There are many competencies models that can be applied to the Malaysian organization. The challenges are to choose the right competency model to be applied into organization. The ASTD leadership competency has been chosen as a model because it has been tested in Taiwan which has similarities in their organizational culture and working climate with Malaysia. Thus, the ASTD leadership competency model concept is one of the ways to ensure the leadership qualities in Malaysia's organization are enhanced and improved. The model also needs to parallel the national policies and vision provided by the Malaysian government. Although there are many competency models that can be applied into local settings, the model itself needs to be adjusted to local culture. The ASTD competency model is one of the models that had been used and tested outside the United States. The model can be utilized as a platform for organizations to perceive the best development plans for their current and future leaders. A leadership-competency model should serve as the foundation for any organization's leadership-development system (McCarthy, 2008).

For many years the ASTD has developed and used the competency model in United States as a guideline in hiring employees and to provide better delivery in training and development. The competency model has helped guide organizations in the hiring and selection process by selecting applicants who are already top performers in their profession (Smith, 2008). Others think that the competency model also provides the basic competencies for the employees to enhance their performance as they move the leader up into better career positions. The ASTD-competency model defines what people need to know and do to be successful in the organization, in the context of learning and performance, and tries to balance the strategic, financial, and business goals of organizations with the interests of the people who are doing the work (Weinstein, 2005).

To ascertain how to get the Malaysian leadership on the right track, the organizations must develop or benchmark some competency models that can be applied to real situations. Even though the organizations under the private sector had their own competency model, it did not explain explicitly about the traits of the competencies. Leadership-development programs often include the identification of competency and the creation of a competency model (Emiliani, 2003). Thus, the leadership model develop by ASTD can be used by Malaysian organizations as a benchmark to understand and to assess the desired leadership attributes. In general, the ASTD-leader-competency model is divided into four main sections which are: 1) personal leadership, 2) association management, 3) teamwork and commitment, and 4) learning and performance as shown in Figure 1. Although the model consists of four main sections, this paper only focuses on personal

leadership competencies. Under the influence of the leadership competencies, it covers vision, critical thinking, self-confidence and assertiveness and effective communication.

To obtain a better view of how this leadership-competency model works outside the United States, it is important to merge the model with the Malaysian organizational culture and view it from the management perspective as well. Malaysian organizational culture is seen as a hierarchical structure, especially in management. The characteristic of typical Malaysian management style is to maintain “Malaysian cultural values of saving face and maintaining harmonious relationships” (Ahmad, 2005, p. 26).

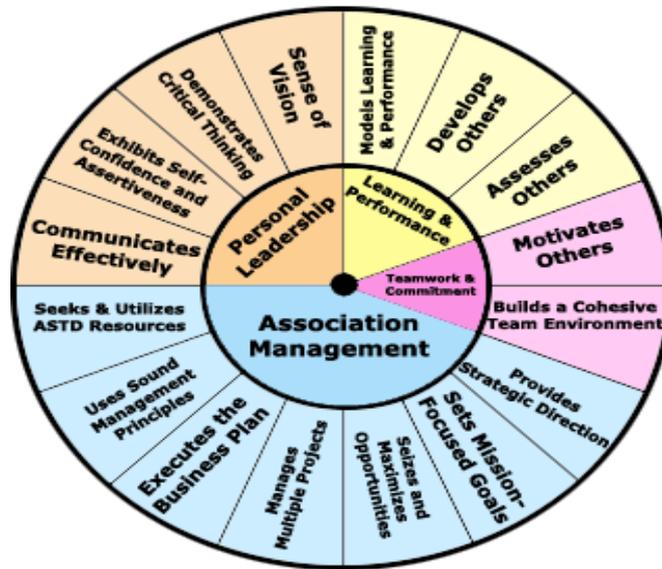


Figure 1: Leader Competency Model (ASTD, 2005)

Vision

It is mentioned under the personal leadership competencies, that leaders should have a sense of vision. The good leaders with the clear vision will benefit an organization in the long run. A prime leadership skill would be to envision some desired future state of being, and to inspire others to understand and share that vision (Morden, 1997). The leader should articulate the vision and take full responsibility towards achieving the vision. To ensure that it is achievable, the leader can come out with several different approaches to monitor the progress, such as strategic planning, key performance index, gap analysis, SWAT analysis, scenario planning and other tools that are available.

In Malaysia, even though most of the leaders have a vision it does not get conveyed to their subordinates. In most of the time this situation happens because of the organizations bureaucracies. It becomes worse for some organizations when it becomes a written vision for an organization and is published only to please the employees. As a result a subordinate always misinterprets most of the vision when it comes into action and is implemented. The consequence of this occurrence will affect the organizations performance, and in the long run will impact the leadership competencies. Leaders need to deliver the vision in a clear way so the subordinate can understand and apply it in their everyday job. According to Conger and Benjamin (1999), leaders should inculcate organization vision and values by building a share understanding of what the organization is about and how it should operate.

Critical Thinking

Critical thinking is referring to how competent the leader is to solve any given problem in any situation. The good leaders should use their critical thinking to overcome problems and plan good solutions. The leader who thinks clearly,

sorts through the clutter, anticipates well, and uses critical thinking skills (Chartrand & Rose, 2008). In order to solve problems or come out with good interventions, the leaders need an analytical thinking approach. It is an advantage if the leader can view problems with logical conceptualizing and design the solution based on desired outcomes.

In organizational settings, leaders are the one who navigate the organization and become a problems solver. They need to enhance their thinking skills and endeavor the approach of 'thinking outside the box'. It is a trend now that employees are trained to have a critical thinking as a soft skill because it is a good approach to teach future leaders. It is clear that the concept of critical thinking within the leadership and management are important to improve performance in the workplace (Natale & Ricci, 2006). The leadership style of Malaysia and way of thinking had an influence from the elder person and the heritage of the culture. The follower or subordinates are educated not to query any decision from the leader and just follow whatever instructions are given. It leads to this way of thinking and becomes a problem once they are in a leadership position. The future leader needs to change the way they think and start to polish their technique on perceiving problems so it would not be a difficulty when they become a leader.

Self Confidence & Assertiveness

All leaders, regardless of the type of organization should have self-confidence. It is viewed that leader self-confidence is a fundamental basis in leadership. Being a leader with self-confidence will influence employees in their every decision and task given. It is important to show the character and high level of confidence as a leader because it will motivate the employees to achieve an organization's goal. On other hand, assertiveness is an integral part of effective leadership in communication. Both of the attributes are important to leaders because it will build the rapport between management and the employees.

Leaders need to be trained to look confident in front of their subordinates so that they will be respected and have courage to listen. There is no right or wrong answer when it comes to decision making, there is only a solution and a leader with self-confident can convince the subordinates that the decision is the best for organization. At the end of any decision made by the leader, they have to commit to the decision. Even though sometimes the decision is wrong, a good leader can accept a failure and learn something from the mistake. If failure is perceived negatively, the organizational learning is limited (Thorne, 2000). In Malaysia, leaders always fear failure because it becomes a performance indication of leadership style. It would be a paradigm shift for a Malaysian leader to accept failure and build self-confidence from a situation that has failed.

Effective Communication

Effective communication happens only when the receiver understands what the message sender is trying to convey. In an organization's case, the sender would be the leader and the receivers are employees or subordinates. Leaders need to be clear when sharing important messages with employees so that communication is effective (Kesby, 2008). The leaders also should understand that the communication is not only verbal, it covers almost all aspects including the organization's vision and mission, memos, letters, instructions and other variables that make communication happen. Organization leaders develop an effective, focused and strong management style by communicating their values and by making sure their strategy has been received and embraced by organizational members (De Waal, 2007).

Most leaders, including Malaysian leaders are more on talking than listening. The leader should understand that effective communication consist of two ways that is giving and receiving. To be a good speaker, leaders should be good listeners first. It would polish a leadership quality if the leader was trained to process the information first before giving any feedback. The greatest leadership trait is listening because it demands more than hearing, it requires the use of sight,

voice, and feelings so all interrelated in the process (Scarnati, 1998). It is clear that a leader with good listening skills is also a leader that communicates better.

CHALLENGED IN ADOPTING COMPETENCY MODEL IN MALAYSIA

In order to successfully adopt any competency model into Malaysian organizations, it is important to consider the two most influential factors. The future development of a competency model needs to be considering the workers' diversity in organizations. It is important to view the perspective of the competency model from Malaysian organizational culture and organizational performance.

Organization Culture

As mentioned earlier in Malaysian organizations, the most influential factor that should be considered while dealing with leadership competencies is the organization's culture. The organization's culture is influencing the practices of the Malaysian style of leadership which is reflected in the structure of the Malaysian society in which the elders are the most respected members. Malaysia's leadership style has been long known to be a hierarchical structure. In order to apply any competencies from the outside, such as the ASTD competencies model, one should consider the organization's culture. Leadership skills and expertise are likely to be more closely bound and constrained by situational requirements (Zaccaro, 2007).

In order to remain competitive, an organization must change and follow the path driven by human skill and competencies. At times organizations fail at building leadership capacity because they implement development options that do not fit their culture (Weiss & Molinaro, 2006). Malaysian organizations should implement the best practices and try to build its own environment, culture and working climate that is suitable for all employees. If Malaysia adopted another culture and adapted it to their organization, this would not increase the Malaysian organizations performance. Employees only motivate and work hard if the working environment generates a self-belonging atmosphere. It takes a long time to cultivate a good working environment in any organization. Leaders and employees should commit to the process and put a lot of effort in doing so, so in the future it would increase an organizations performance.

Organization Performance

Organizations' performances are basically being scaled and evaluated by the success of the leader. Even though most of the organizations are ranked and labeled by the revenue, the most influential person that is directly linked to the organization's performance is the leader. The leaders have the most control of an organization in terms of vision, direction and business plan. Thus, the leader appointed to be in charge of an organization should have all the qualities and competency to succeed in implementing the organization's goals. The leader-trait theory, that dominated leadership literature, explained leadership effectiveness by the natural characteristics and abilities of the leader (Oyinlade, 2006).

CONCLUSIONS

To apply the leadership competency model from the United States of America and implement it, in the context of a Malaysian organization, would be a very difficult task. Many factors should be considered such as the external environment and the cultural differences that could act as barriers. The organization needs to change and inculcate the organization's culture into the implementation process. After the leadership style is blended with the organization's culture then the improvement will gradually come. In order to successfully implement the leadership competency model in an organization, it is the leadership that has the influence and commitment to change. Competent leadership is essential if the objective of organizational improvement is to occur.

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