Staff Rating of Deans' Leadership Soft Skills at Three Malaysian Universities

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ABSTRACT

The emergence of service and knowledge-based sectors has necessitated the need for professionals, such as deans of institutions of higher learning, to acquire and master soft skills. Using Rowena Crosbie's (2005) model of leadership soft skills, this paper discusses the perception frequency implementation of leadership soft skills among deans at three Malaysian institutions of higher learning. To achieve the aim of this study, a survey research design was used to examine the frequency implementation of the eight components of leadership soft skills. Findings show that the deans only moderately implemented the eight components of leadership soft skills.

Keywords: Deans, leadership soft skills

INTRODUCTION

University administrators need to communicate and navigate the waves of change effectively. This places emphasis on good leadership and the need to collaborate, connect and work together with people at all levels. An organisation's success largely depends on leaders having directive elements with leadership soft skills. Crosbie's (2005) model of leadership soft skills stresses that leaders need to focus on results and relationships. According to

Crosbie, administrators need to focus on the eight components of leadership soft skills which are collaboration/teamwork, communication skills, initiative, leadership ability, people development/coaching, personal effectiveness/personal mastery, planning and organising, and presentation skills. In collaboration/teamwork administrators need to be flexible, able to problem solve, and work collaboratively in a team.

Similarly, administrators with good communication skills pay attention to what they hear, do things proactively, remain unbiased, non-judgmental, and treat everyone equally. In addition, they need to be able to recognise issues, problems and opportunities (Abell, 2002), and align teammates around a shared vision (George & McLean, 2007). Administrators with good people development and coaching skills are good teachers who challenge employees to learn and reward them accordingly (Iles, 2001).

In conclusion, Crosbie (2005) argues that leadership development is vital during times of economic and political uncertainty and change.

METHODS

Quantitative data for this study were collected through survey questionnaires. Survey questionnaires were distributed to support staff in three Malaysian universities to gather their perceptions towards their deans' leadership soft skills. The rationale for choosing support staff from grades 17 to 36 stemmed from their close interaction with their respective deans. This category also was more aware of their administrators' practice of leadership soft skills than lower level categories of support staff.

Since there was no established instrument to measure leadership soft skills, the method used here had to designed and validated by a panel of experts in leadership. The instrument consists of 80 items. The instrument was administered in both English and Bahasa Malaysia to ensure minimum uncertainty on the part of respondents regarding the questions. In this study, the stratified sampling was used.

Research Objective

The main objective of this study is to identify the frequency implementation of the eight components of leadership soft skills by deans at three Malaysian universities located in Penang, Perak and Perlis.

RESULTS

Descriptive statistics were used to calculate the mean scores and standard deviations of the eight components of leadership soft skills, i.e. collaboration/ teamwork, communication skills, initiative, leadership ability, people development/coaching, personal effectiveness/personal mastery, planning and organising, and presentation skills.

Perceived Frequency Implementation of the Eight Components of Leadership Soft Skills by the Deans

The mean scores and standard deviations of the frequency implementation for the eight components of leadership soft skills by deans are shown in Table 1. Table 1 shows the mean scores for the eight components of leadership soft skills ranged from 3.92 to 4.15. This shows that, "planning and organising" (M = 4.15, SD = .82) was the most frequently implemented of the leadership soft skills, followed by "presentation skills" (M = 4.06, SD = .86) and "leadership ability" (M = 4.02, SD = .89). In addition, "people development/coaching" (M = 3.92, SD = .96) was the skill least frequently implemented by deans. Based on the information in Table 1, it can be pointed out that deans only moderately implemented all eight components of leadership soft skills.

Table 1
Mean scores and standard deviations of the eight components of leadership soft skills

Variables	M	SD
Planning and Organising	4.15	.82
Presentation Skills	4.06	.86
Leadership Ability	4.02	.89
Communication Skills	3.99	.87
Personal Effectiveness/Personal Mastery	3.99	.83
Collaboration/Teamwork	3.98	.90
Initiative	3.98	.74
People Development/Coaching	3.92	.96

Table 2
Levels of implementation of leadership soft skills components by deans

Level	Scale
Low	1.00 - 2.66
Moderate	2.67 – 4.33
High	4.34 – 6.00

Mean and Standard Deviation of Individual Items in the Eight Components of Leadership Soft Skills

The study seeks to examine the mean scores on the perceived frequency implementation of the eight components of leadership soft skills by deans.

Mean and Standard Deviation of Collaboration/Teamwork in the Leadership Soft Skills Components

Table 3 summarises the mean and standard deviation scores of the 10 items of collaboration/teamwork. It can be seen that the most frequently implemented item in the component of leadership soft skills by deans was "openness in expressing their ideas" (M = 4.27, SD = 1.05), whereas the item "finds common ground in solving mutual problems" was the least frequently implemented by deans (M = 3.62, SD = 1.14).

Table 3
Mean scores and standard deviations of individual items in collaboration/ teamwork

Items		M	SD
My dean			
1.	finds common ground in solving mutual problems	3.62	1.14
2.	cooperates in solving mutual problems	4.03	1.13
3.	participates in group/team meetings effectively	4.07	1.11
4.	encourages diversity of opinion	4.06	1.11
5.	helps staff articulate his/her own opinion	4.00	1.17
6.	establishes consensus through group/team discussion	3.86	1.16
7.	facilitates staff to work collaboratively in a group/team	4.02	1.09
8.	is sensitive to the needs of others in a group/team	3.87	1.16
9.	is open in expressing his/her ideas in a group/team	4.27	1.05
10.	is open in expressing his/her feelings in a group/team	4.03	1.08

Mean and Standard Deviation of Communication Skills in the Leadership Soft Skills Components

Table 4 displays the mean and standard deviation scores for the 10 items related to communication skills. It is clear that the item "communicates effectively" was the most frequently item implemented by deans. This conclusion is based on the mean and standard deviation scores ($M = 4.19$, $SD = 1.09$). On the other hand, the item "checks for understanding" was the least frequently implemented item by deans when communicating with their staff ($M = 3.80$, $SD = 1.14$).

Table 4
Mean scores and standard deviations of individual items in communication skills

Items		M	SD
My dean			
1.	adapts communication to individual needs	3.94	1.04
2.	checks for understanding	3.8	1.14
3.	listens attentively to the complete message including body language	3.95	1.08
4.	restates to ensure comprehension	3.95	1.02
5.	questions to ensure comprehension	4.08	.99
6.	seeks to negotiate in solving issues or conflict	4.02	1.08
7.	clarifies problems by being open so as to enhance quality of decisions	4.10	1.03
8.	resolves conflict by being open so as to enhance quality of decisions	3.82	1.08
9.	actively listens to other points of view	4.00	1.06
10.	communicates effectively	4.19	1.09

Mean and Standard Deviation of Initiative in the Leadership Soft Skills Components

Table 5 shows that when it comes to taking initiative, deans most frequently implemented two leadership soft skills. The data show that they were able to "react to problems" (M = 4.21, SD = 1.01) and to "do things proactively" (M = 4.21, SD = .99). However, the infrequently implemented item was "take action before being directed or forced" (M = 3.58, SD = 1.19).

Table 5
Mean scores and standard deviations of individual items in initiative

Items	M	SD
My dean		
1. recognises problems	4.12	1.10
2. reacts to problems	4.21	1.01
3. takes initiative in solving problems	4.16	1.05
4. takes action to achieve goals beyond specific job responsibilities	4.02	1.10
5. faces up to difficult issues	3.93	1.06
6. takes a stand on difficult issues	3.98	1.06
7. makes decision before being directed	3.76	1.14
8. takes action before being directed or forced	3.58	1.19
9. does not demonstrate a bias for taking action	3.80	1.37
10. does things proactively	4.21	.99

Mean and Standard Deviation of Leadership Ability in the Leadership Soft Skills Components

Table 6 shows the mean and standard deviation for the items pertaining to leadership ability of deans. For leadership ability, results from the various items listed in Table 6 suggest that respondents perceived their deans as most encouraging in goal setting (M = 4.25, SD = 1.07). Nevertheless, they (deans) were perceived to be least likely to reward their staff (M = 3.78, SD = 1.16).

Table 6
Mean scores and standard deviations of individual items in leadership ability

Items	M	SD
My dean		
1. communicates strategic vision in order to mobilise others to action	4.10	1.04
2. assigns individuals suited to the job based on competencies	4.10	1.04
3. delegates responsibilities to optimise staff skills	4.00	1.07
4. encourages wide participation of staff in goal setting	4.25	1.07
5. encourages wide participation of staff in decision making	3.98	1.14

Table 6 *(continue)*

6.	encourages wide participation of staff in problem solving	4.01	1.11
7.	gives staff the support to make decisions	3.92	1.19
8.	appropriately uses recognition to reward	3.78	1.16
9.	maintains consistency of high standards of ethical conduct	4.09	1.10
10.	analyses both successes and failures for clues to improvement	3.96	1.05

Mean and Standard Deviation of People Development/Coaching in the Leadership Soft Skills Component

Table 7 presents the mean and standard deviation scores of the 10 items contained in the people development/coaching component. The leadership soft skill that was most popularly implemented by deans was to support their staff in education/training programmes ($M = 4.19$, $SD = 1.06$). In contrast, the two skills least implemented items were recognising their staff's exceptional contributions ($M = 3.79$, $SD = 1.27$) and evaluating their staff on time ($M = 3.79$, $SD = 1.21$).

Table 7
Mean scores and standard deviations of individual items in people development/coaching

Items		M	SD
My dean			
1.	recommends education/training programmes	3.99	1.14
2.	supports education/training programmes	4.19	1.06
3.	recognises performance with positive feedback	4.00	1.11
4.	uses positive feedback to motivate staff	4.01	1.11
5.	uses corrective feedback to motivate staff	3.93	1.08
6.	focuses feedback on specific behaviour not the person	3.90	1.07
7.	recognises exceptional contributions	3.79	1.27
8.	evaluates staff accurately	3.81	1.21
9.	evaluates staff consistently	3.84	1.19
10.	evaluates staff on time	3.79	1.21

Mean and Standard Deviation of Personal Effectiveness/Personal Mastery in Leadership Soft Skills Components

Table 8 provides the mean and standard deviation scores for items in the personal effectiveness/personal mastery component related to leadership soft skills. The results indicate that in personal effectiveness/ personal mastery, deans were most frequently "open to new information" ($M = 4.28$, $SD = 1.01$), while they least frequently "exploit their personal strengths" ($M = 3.50$, $SD = 1.22$).

Table 8
Mean scores and standard deviations of individual items in personal effectiveness/personal mastery

	Items	M	SD
My dean			
1.	seeks to understand personal strengths	3.84	1.11
2.	seeks to exploit personal strengths	3.50	1.22
3.	strives to build competency in areas of weakness	3.90	1.09
4.	is personally committed to continuously improve oneself through learning/self-development to enhance performance	4.04	1.04
5.	actively works to continuously improve oneself through learning/self-development	4.12	1.01
6.	actively seeks new information	4.15	1.00
7.	is open to new information	4.28	1.01
8.	is open to feedback from others	4.09	1.09
9.	functions effectively under stressful conditions	3.94	1.02
10.	maintains good relationships under stressful conditions	4.02	1.19

Mean and Standard Deviation of Planning and Organising in the Leadership Soft Skills Components

Table 9 shows both mean and standard deviation scores of items contained in the planning and organising component of leadership soft skills. The results reveal that the most frequently implemented skill was "meets commitment" ($M = 4.27$, $SD = 1.02$). Conversely, the skill least frequently implemented by the deans was "prioritising quickly in an environment with many variables" ($M = 3.96$, $SD = 1.00$).

Table 9
Mean scores and standard deviations of individual items in planning and organising

Items		M	SD
My dean			
1.	defines short and long range objectives	4.12	1.03
2.	uses other resources to achieve planned goals	4.15	1.04
3.	prioritises quickly in an environment with many variables	3.96	1.00
4.	pursues tasks with persistence despite daily distractions	4.20	.97
5.	pursues goals with persistence despite daily distractions	4.20	.97
6.	achieves established goals by assigned deadlines	4.13	.96
7.	meets commitment	4.27	1.02
8.	fulfils promise	4.23	1.07
9.	responds to change with flexibility	4.16	.99
10.	responds to change with appropriate speed	4.13	.98

Mean and Standard Deviation of Presentation Skills in the Leadership Soft Skills Components

Table 10 exhibits the mean and standard deviation scores for all the items in the presentation skills component of leadership skills. Results of the mean scores and standard deviations imply that deans most frequently "present themselves in a professional manner" ($M = 4.33, SD = 1.12$). However, they least frequently "convince others to accept an idea using appropriate methods of persuasion" ($M = 3.51, SD = 1.17$).

Table 10
Mean scores and standard deviations of individual items in presentation skills

Items		M	SD
My dean			
1.	presents himself/herself in a professional manner	4.33	1.12
2.	is effective in presenting ideas to others in individual situations	4.21	1.10
3.	is effective in presenting ideas to others in group situations	4.25	.07
4.	makes effective use of visual aids in presentations	4.08	1.04
5.	thinks carefully about effect of words	4.00	1.10
6.	thinks carefully about non-verbal actions	3.99	1.03
7.	convince others to accept an idea using appropriate methods of persuasion	3.51	1.17
8.	invites input/questions from others	4.11	1.13
9.	facilitates open dialogue/exchange of information and ideas	4.13	1.11
10.	addresses the emotional position of audience	3.98	1.10

DISCUSSION

Leaders in institutes of higher education need to be competent in using a soft approach in their leadership style (Siti Asiah, 2011). The findings of this study revealed that the administrators in three Malaysian universities in the north-west region of Peninsular Malaysia recorded a moderate rating in implementing the eight components of leadership soft skills. To deal with this short coming, educational administrators should be knowledgeable and remain vigilant of the concept of soft skills.

CONCLUSION

This study shows administrators in public universities in Malaysia need to understand the importance, relevance and value of leadership soft skills.

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