A STUDY ON LEADERSHIP BEHAVIOUR AND ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING IN HIGHER LEARNING INSTITUTIONS

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Abstract

The forces of tremendous change such as globalisation, technology advancements and competitive environment forces organisations to adapt to strategic change so that they could remain relevant and competitive advantages. Nevertheless, as learning is one of the factors to competitiveness, there is a critical need for the top management as well as the organisational members to be equipped with organizational knowledge. Previous studies showed that leaders’ support is seemed to be an essential factor in promoting learning cultures in an organisation. However, to what extend this is true in especially in the local setting. Therefore, this study intends to examine the relationship between leadership styles and organisational learning among the academics in Malaysian higher educational institutions. Using a stage cluster sampling, a total of 120 academics from both public and private higher educational institutions participated in the study. The result revealed that there was a positive and moderate relationship between organisational learning and transformational leadership. The implications of the study will be discussed.

Key words: organizational learning, transformational leadership, transactional leadership, commitment, openness

Introduction

In today’s changing and dynamic environment, many organizations including higher learning institutions are required to adapt to changes or else be left out in this competitive world. There are many driving forces that trigger the need for organizational change such as globalization, deregulation, and the advancement of ICT and communication technology. Thus, in order for organisational members to cope with issues external and internal threat, organisational learning is gaining prevalent attention as a crucial need for global strategic effectiveness (Doz, Santos & Williamson, 2001). The ability to learn faster is the only significant features for sustaining organisational advantage in future and thus, this competitive advantage can be accomplished by employing organisational learning during organisational transformation (Kapp, 1999). Tsang (1997) and Easterby and Lyles (2003) define organisational learning as the study of and within an organisation learning processes. Nevertheless, whether in private or public organisations, organisational learning is a process of individual learning engaged in initiating and seeking knowledge. This is done for institutionalisation purposes in facilitating the organisation to be more
adaptable proactively, subject to its developmental level (Castaneda & Rios, 2007).

Accordingly, managers are forced to improve their organisations’ competiveness by encountering customer demands, innovating new products and embracing new technology in current competitive driven era (Akhtar & Ahmad Khan, 2011). In order to stay ahead of competitors, organisations need to enhance current competencies by developing organisational productivity and performance. Therefore, it is a must for organisation to have more flexible, adaptable and proactive organisations. In achieving this, one requirement has to be fulfilled that is to learn faster than the competitors (de Geus, 1988). Hence, it is agreeable by many researchers that learn faster is the only way to remain competitive advantage Senge (1990).

The concepts of organizational learning

Scholars have proposed a variety of definitions of organizational learning. According to Argyris (1977), organizational learning is a process of detecting and correcting error. Probst and Büchel (1997) go further, defining organizational learning as the ability of the institution as a whole to discover errors and correct them and to change the organization's knowledge base and values so as to generate new problem-solving skills and new capacity for action. On the other hand, Chiva & Alegre, (2005) suggest that organisational learning is the process of shared construction of mutual beliefs and meanings, whereby social context plays a significance role. The outcomes of learning and behaviour of its people resulted to the development of a learning organisation (Honey & Munford, 1992; Senge, 1990, in Wang & Ahmed, 2003). Organisations are places where individuals deliberately network with each others through processes of knowledge seeking and experience gaining (Kolb, 1984; Honey & Mumford, 1992). Therefore, valuing, managing and developing individual growth should be the most important aim in a learning organisation (Scarborough, Swan & Preston, 1998).

Literature suggested that organizational learning capability is an intricate multidimensional constructs and is a useful measurement of organizational learning (Santos-Vijande et al., 2005, Hult and Ferrell, 1997). According to Goh and Richards (1997) organizational learning capability is the ability of an organization to implement the appropriate management practices, structures and procedures that facilitate and encourage learning. In fact, they identifies five dimensions including clarity of purpose and mission, leadership commitment and empowerment, experimentation and rewards, transfer of knowledge, teamwork and group problem solving, and it establishes a learning scale made up of 21 items. On the other hand, Templeton et al. (2002) asserts that organizational learning consist of awareness, communication, performance assessment, intellectual cultivation, environmental adaptability, social learning, intellectual capital management and organizational grafting.

Jerez-Gómez et al. (2005) define organizational learning capability as “an organization's ability to process knowledge (i.e. create, acquire, transfer and integrate knowledge) and change its behaviour to reflect the new cognitive situation, with the idea of improving its performance”. They identify four dimensions in this capability: the manager’s commitment to learning, the company’s strategic vision, experimentation, and the transfer and integration of knowledge. The first dimension, management’s commitment to learning, supports and encourages the acquisition, creation and transfer of knowledge (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995). The second
dimension, the firm’s systematic vision, is key to getting employees to understand that the organization is oriented to learning (Williams, 2001), because having a common idea about the degree to which the company is oriented to learning is seen as giving meaning and generating identity (McGuill et al., 1992). The third dimension, openness and experimentation, refers to the entry of new ideas and perspectives, internal and external, allowing for the constant renewal, extension and improvement of individual knowledge (Slocum et al., 1994). Finally, transfer implies the extension of knowledge acquired individually to other people (McGuill and Slocum, 1993), while integration involves creating organizational memory by means of routines and processes (Huber, 1991). This study adapted Jerez-Gómez et al. (2005) model to understand organizational learning in a higher learning context.

The relationship between Organizational learning and leadership behaviour

Much of the studies on Organizational leaning have been focused on business entities and scanty studies in the area of higher learning institutions. Hence, in order for institutions to remain at competitive edge, it seems pertinent to investigate the Malaysian higher education institutions for the obstructive factors detection and the progress strategies development in order to take cumulative steps towards learning organization. However, in the process of adopting organizational learning framework, White and Weathersby (2005) listed a number of barriers that hinder universities from becoming learning organisations. These include crisis of strategy, structure and culture, plus academic background conflicts. Then, Dill (1999) emphasised that accountability is required for universities to accomplish their aims to construct organisational learning. This is significant at different levels, for example Middlehurst (1999) suggested that academic leadership is supposed to consider social interaction as a process in facilitating individuals and groups towards specific goals. Leaders have significant responsibilities in a learning organisation as they not only take up commitment to change (Senge, 1996), but also improve ability of organisational members’ to learn. In addition, Ulrich, Jick and von Glinow (1993) supported that leader’ behaviours will reflect upon organisational system and teamwork, also as a decision maker. Leaders of a learning organisation inspire a clear, mutual sense of objectives to encourage collaborative work, authorisation investigation and risk-taking (Locke & Jain, 1995). Hence, leadership responsibility and empowerment is recommended as a feature of a learning organisation (Yuraporn Sudharatna & Laubie Li, 2004).

Zagorsek et al. (2009) illustrated that leadership has the utmost effect on behavioural and cognitive changes, in fact is the ultimate significant stage of the learning process in organisation. There are two approaches on how leadership influences change in behaviour and mind. Firstly, leadership influences them during the prior information-processing stage of the organisational learning process. Through the facilitation on organisational information-processing, changes in the behaviours and mentality of organisational members are supported simultaneously to deal with changes in business setting, internally and externally. Nevertheless, leaders also influence the behaviour and mentality directly in addition to the indirect influence during information. In terms of strategic point of view, Marsick and Watkins (2003) discovered on how leadership roles play the most important factor throughout all organisational level in the process of organisational learning. Brown and Posner (2001) discovered significant relationship between transformational leadership styles
to composite (challenge, inspire, enable, model, encourage) learning in organisations. In addition, Farrell et al. (2004) found positive connection between transformational leadership and organisational learning in the matter of information sharing and exchanging and hence, showed motivational factors that transformational leaders’ acquire in encouraging employees’ to achieving organisational learning objectives. To this end, study by Amitay, Popper and Lipshitz (2005) and Jansen, Vera, and Crossan (2009) also revealed positive correlation of transformational leadership with organisational learning. Organisational learning has been much discussed in Western context and the outcomes on organisation always shown positive result. However, scanty study has been conducted in local context and it is claimed that the implementation is still misleading and no clear prescription has been specified (Ahmad, 2009). Therefore, this study intends to examine the relationship between leadership behaviour and organizational learning in Malaysian learning institutions.

**Objectives of the study**

The objectives of the study are two-fold, namely to determine (a) the level of organisational learning and perceived leadership styles of academics of Malaysian higher educational institutions (b) the relationship between leadership behaviour and organizational learning among academics of Malaysian higher educational institutions.

**Methodology**

This study was based on a conceptual framework that combines part of the adapted theory of organizational learning capacity (Gomez, et al (2005) and transformational leadership theory (Bass, 1985). In this study, organizational learning measured the capability of an organisation to process knowledge. Hence, Gomez et. al (2005) developed Organisational Learning Capability (OLC) questionnaire which measured four dimensions respectively managerial commitment, system perspective, openness and experimentation and knowledge transfer and integration. The questionnaire is a 7-Likert Scale ranging from “Strongly Disagree” = 1 to “Strongly Agree” = 7. The perceived leadership behaviour (the independent variable), is reflected in the transformational leadership theory (Bass, 1985). An instrument called the multifactor leadership style questionnaire (MLQ-5x form) was developed from Bass and Avolio (1990) and used in the study. The instrument consisted of 45 items which measured the full-range of leadership styles and behaviours namely Transformational Leadership, Transactional Leadership and Augmentation Effect among the Subordinates. The leaders’ behaviours depicted in each item were measured using 5-point scale where 4= “frequently, if not always”, 3 = “fairly often”, 2 = “sometimes”, 1 = once in a while” and 0 = “not at all”. The MLQ is strongly predictive of leader performance (Bass, 1997). The samples were drawn from the academic staff of the Malaysian higher learning institutions. Hence, based on Cohen’s formulas (1992), a sample size of 150 was determined however, only 120 responded the questionnaires. Pearson’s Product –Moment Correlation Coefficient (r) was used to measure the strength and direction of the relationship between leadership behaviour and organizational learning.
Findings

Research objective 1a: Analysis on the level of organizational learning among the academic staff of the Malaysian learning institutions.

Table 1a: The Levels of Organisational Learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Frequency (N = 120)</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low (Less than 2.99)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate (3.00 – 5.00)</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>63.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High (5.01 – 7.00)</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>33.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1a showed the levels of organisational learning among academics of Malaysian higher educational institutions. The result revealed that 63.3% or 76 of the respondents perceived that organisational learning at theirs’ organisation was moderate. Meanwhile, about 40 respondents or (33.3%) perceived that organisational learning was high. Yet, only four respondents or (3.3%) perceived that organisational learning was low at theirs’ organisation. Further analysis was carried out to examine each of the dimensions of organizational learning and the result is as follow:

Table 1b: Dimensions of Organisational Learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimensions of Organisational Learning</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Managerial Commitment</td>
<td>4.665</td>
<td>.861</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>System Perspective</td>
<td>4.838</td>
<td>1.055</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Openness and Experimentation</td>
<td>4.946</td>
<td>1.030</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge Transfer and Integration</td>
<td>4.444</td>
<td>.694</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mean indicator- Low (Less than 2.99)
moderate (3.00 – 5.00)
High (5.01 – 7.00)

The means score of the four dimensions of organisational learning measured were 4.665 (managerial commitment), 4.838 (system perspective), 4.946 (openness and experimentation) and 4.444 (knowledge transfer and integration). Hence, the findings showed that the respondents’ capability towards organisational learning were moderate, indicating that an average capability to support organisational learning process.

Research objective 1b: Analysis on Transformational Leadership behaviour of the superior as perceived by the academic staff of Higher learning Institutions in Malaysia

Based on five-point Likert scale ranged from 0 to 4, the results showed that the mean score for perceived transformational leadership styles was 2.343 with a standard deviation of .816. On the other hand, the mean score for transactional leadership style was 1.73 with a standard deviation of .512. The result indicated that the respondents
perceived that their superior exhibit moderate level of both transformational and transactional leadership behaviour. However, the finding also suggest that the academic staff perceived that their leaders were slightly more towards having transformational leadership behaviour (mean= 2.343, std dev= .816) as compared to transactional leadership behaviour (mean= 173, std dev=. 512)

Table 2: The Transformational Leadership Style Score

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leadership Style</th>
<th>mean</th>
<th>std dev</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transformational</td>
<td>2.343</td>
<td>0.816</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transactional</td>
<td>1.73</td>
<td>0.512</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mean indicator- Low= 0.00 -1.33, moderate- 1.34-2.67, high 2.68- 4.0

Research objective 2: Analysis on the relationship between organizational learning and leadership behaviour.

The Pearson product moment correlation analysis was run to analyse the relationship between organisational learning, leadership styles and emotional intelligence. As shown in Table 3 below, the study revealed that there was a positive and moderate relationship between organisational learning and transformational leadership (r = 539, p <0.01). For perceived transformational leadership style, the correlation with organizational learning was .539 and the direction of the relationship was positive. The data showed that there was a moderate and significant relationship between perceived transformational leadership style and organisational learning (r = .539, p < 0.000). By squaring the correlation and then multiplying by 100, the percentage of the variability is shared can be determined. 0.539² = 0.29, multiplied by 100 would be 29%. Hence, perceived transformational leadership shared about 29% of its variability with organisational learning. As for perceived transactional leadership behaviour and organisational learning, the study reported that there was weak correlation between both variables (r = .122, p > 0.01). Lei et al. (1999); Senge (1990), and Swieringa and Wierdsma (1992) illustrated the importance of leadership for organisational learning.

Table 3: Correlation Matrix Analysis of Organisational Learning and Leadership behaviour

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Organisational</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Transformational</td>
<td>.539*</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Transactional</td>
<td>.122</td>
<td>.408*</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discussion and Conclusion
This study was aimed to investigate the relationship between organisational learning and perceived leadership behaviour. The conclusions drawn from the study do not reflect on all academics of higher educational institutions of Malaysia as a whole but limited to only the small sample studied in selected universities. The finding reveals that the level of organisational learning among academics of higher educational institutions of Malaysia was at moderate. With regards to the organisational learning dimensions, the findings showed that the respondents’ viewed openness and experimentation as moderately high indicating a positive attitude towards promoting a climate of openness whereby individualism is avoided yet readiness is built for collective opinions and experiences. The result also in line with what Yukl (2009) described on fundamental key of organisational learning that is collective learning by members of organisation. Moreover, as suggested by Marsick and Watkins (1990), at group level of learning, members of organisations gradually enhanced performance and at the same time open dialogue and group discussion were practiced for diverse opinions. Thus, for organisations to promote organisational learning, it is essential for members of organisation to understand the importance of collective opinions and experiences so that each individual is motivated to seek knowledge for self development and practice lifelong learning. In addition, the mean score for system perspective was also moderately high. In relation to this, Hult and Ferrell (1997) illustrated that system perspective dealt with the efforts by members of organisations in enhancing performance towards achieving the organisations’ objective. In this view, current trends in most higher education systems reflect on the increased variation in purposes, goals and objectives (Askling & Kristensen, 2000) and this is significantly relevant to the result shown. This study also found that the academic staff perceived that their superior s exhibit more transformational leadership behaviour. In line with leadership paradigm, the finding of the study was supported by Snell (2001) where the author suggested that transformational leadership ability is one of the essential keys that contributed to the development of learning organisations.

Another significant result shows that there was a positive and moderate relationship between organisational learning and transformational leadership. This is in line with the study done by Brown and Posner (2001). In fact, their study showed that transformational leadership was significantly linked to composite learning in organisations. Hence, leaders must prepare followers with learning environment to support the continuous change to enhance through knowledge acquisition and understanding. Leadership is defined as “process of influencing a group towards the achievements of goals” and a leader as “someone who can influence others and who has managerial authority” (Robbins & Coulter, 2005). Respectable leadership attributes required in learning organisation would be suggested to be transformational leadership, yet it can also be transactional. Hence, both leaders would be good for organisational learning but more transformational and less transactional is agreeable (Bass, 2000). In respect to educational setting, study by Yu and Jantzi (2002) found that transformational leaders were found to be responsible for initiating changes in organisational culture, strategies and structures to be competitive as in the corporate setting. Moreover, Barnett et al. (2001) also argued that transformational leadership is essential to support trust, respect and stimulate members of organisation towards change, enhancements and effectiveness in an education environment. In terms of learning, Brown and Posner (2001) study showed that transformational leadership was significantly linked to composite learning in organisations. Hence, leaders must prepare followers with learning environment to support the continuous change to
enhance through knowledge acquisition and understanding. During organisational change for organisational learning, transformational leadership qualities are required to generate followers’ empowerment to change from one condition to another (Shamir et. al, 1993; Yukl, 1999 in Jones & Rudd, 2007). Although the study showed the level of organisational learning was moderate, the presence of transformational leadership hence is a catalyst towards the development process of a learning organization. Moreover, leadership studies found that transformational leaders are more effective, innovative and give satisfaction to followers. Hence, in motivating higher educational institutions in Malaysia, leaders and academics members could be provided with a fresh and measureable organisational learning programme. The need for organisational learning programme is at paramount importance to instil learning culture within organisation. Hence, although higher education is naturally a learning institution, the learning culture is not much practiced within organisational members. The directions towards organisational learning could be improved by introducing Organisational Learning Programme.

References


