Rethinking Leadership Behaviour in Higher Education in Malaysia

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Introduction

The last two decades have seen the world of higher education undergoing tremendously difficult times. Academic capitalism, managerialism and economic rationalism (Mok, 2007), driven by the growth of neo-liberalism and the dominance of knowledge-based economy are challenging the fundamental ethos of the academe. In such uncertain times, leadership is critical to chart the development of higher education institutions (HEIs). In some countries, the decline in institutional resources (Johnstone, 1999), changing student demographics (Hutardo and Dey, 1997), shift towards student-centered learning (Barr and Tagg, 1995), impact of technology on faculty role (Baldwin, 1998), and more recently the shift from industrial age to a knowledge age (Dolence and Norris, 1995) have made leadership a key success factor in transforming HEIs. These issues are compounded by the growing trend of cross-border and transnational higher education (Knight, 2006; Huang, 2007; Morshidi, 2006). This paper aims at addressing the need to re-look at leadership issues in higher education institution taking into consideration the cultural contexts of Malaysia and higher education. It argues that leadership theories borrowed from a non-higher education context and non-Malaysian context cannot be directly applied to the context of Malaysian HEIs.

Leadership theories have developed largely in the field of business and management; with leadership research in higher education lagging far behind. Leadership studies in the context of education are largely undertaken in Western cultures. Studies in the Malaysian tertiary education sector requires urgent attention, particularly to address the validity and applicability of leadership findings from two different cultures – that of the western culture and that of the business one. The business culture is sufficiently different from that of higher education environment, and the western culture is different to the Malaysian culture, and this juxtaposition of differences in the cultures will have implications on the leadership of HEIs in Malaysia.

Leadership Theories and Leader Bases of Power

Leaders have been described in terms of character, mannerism, influence and persuasion, relationship patterns, role relationships and as administrative figures. Fundamental to all these definitions is the notion that leadership is an influence process that affects the action of followers (Ansari, 1990; Yukl, 2006). Eddy and VanDerLinden (2006) argue that traditional theories of leadership focusing on leaders' traits and personality need a rethinking to focus more on the actual practice of leadership in HEIs to fully understand what the process of leadership essentially entails.

Leadership theories can be classified as trait theories, power and influence theories, behavioural theories, contingency theories, cultural and symbolic theories, and cognitive theories. Central to the process of leadership is the exercise of power to influence subordinates, and for this, leaders draw upon various bases of power in their relationships with their subordinates.

Power is defined as the potential or the capacity of an agent to alter a target's behaviour, attitudes, intentions, beliefs, emotion and/or values (French and Raven, 1959). The effectiveness of a leader to influence subordinates is very much dependent on the power base, which Ansari (1990) defines as the source of influence in a social relationship. The bases of power include (1) reward power (ability to supply desired rewards), (2) coercive power (ability to withhold desired rewards or make life unpleasant), (3) legitimate power (formal authority derived from position in the organisational hierarchy), (4) referent power (worthy of emulation) (5) expert power (derived from the possession of needed expertise) (6) information power (derived from the possession of required information), and (7) connection power (derived from his/her associates) (Ansari, 1990; Bhal and Ansari, 2000; Hersey et al. 1979; Howell and Costley, 2000).

How a leader exercises these bases of power to influence subordinates in achieving organisational goal, is dependent on contexts; and for HEIs the relevant contexts are the contexts of national culture and academic culture.

The Malaysian Culture

The importance of national culture in organisational effectiveness is rooted in three important reasons: (1) political, as nations are by nature political unit, with theirs own history, legal, educational, governing systems, labour and employer associations, (2) sociological, as nationality provides identity and symbolic value, and (3) psychological, as our thinking are shaped by national cultures (Hofstede, 1983). Further, Hofstede's work in 1983 debunked the commonly-held belief of the 1950s and the 60s that the practice of leadership is universal, existing regardless of national environments.

National culture can be captured through four dimensions, namely (1) power distance, (2) individualism, (3) masculinity, and (4) uncertainty avoidance. Power distance relates to the fundamental issue of how society deals with the fact that people are unequal physically as well as in their mental capacity; and that these differences can grow into inequalities of power and wealth. In organisational settings, great power distance is manifested in hierarchical structures with centralisation of authority and autocratic styles of leadership.

The dimension of individualism-collectivism involves the relationship between an individual and his/her fellow citizens. In highly individualistic societies, typified by the American society, individuals are supposed to be looking after their own interest. Individualistic societies favour autonomy whilst collectivist societies prefer conformity and uniformity.

The masculinity (femininity) dimension relates to the fundamental issue of the social, rather than biological roles of the different sexes in society. In masculine societies the traditional social role of men permeates society and values of *showing off, the need for achievement, making money and "big is beautiful"* are important, whilst in feminine societies, values of *relationship over making money, quality of life, helping others, "small is beautiful"* and *anti-hero* are dominant.

The dimension of uncertainty avoidance relates to how society deals with the fact that time is unidirectional and that we are caught up with the reality of the past, present and the future; and that the future is and will always be unknown and uncertain. Societies with low or weak uncertainty avoidance tolerate and socialise the idea of uncertainty and tend to treat each day as it comes and take risks easily, and thus will not strive hard (Hofstede, 1983). On the other hand, societies with high uncertainty avoidance have difficulty with the unknown and deals with it by either (1) using technology to protect against risks of nature and war, (2) enact laws and formal rules to protect against the unpredictability of human behaviour, and/or (3) adhering to religion where events are interpreted through religious absolutes.

Table 1 indicates the differences in selected national cultures across the globe.

Like many other Far East nations, Malaysia is relatively low on individualism score indicating that it is a collectivist society, with high power distance. It is moderate on the Masculinity-Femininity scale, indicating that though we want to excel, relationship consideration is still important. Lastly, in terms of uncertainty avoidance, we are rated low at a level about equal that of the United States. More studies should be undertaken primarily to re-visit Hofstede's findings in the context of Malaysia.

The Academic Culture

The academe has a long history of an independent thinking culture that may be divergent to that of the business culture. Differences manifest themselves in terms of cultural tensions related to the issue of language, freedom versus structure, fragmented versus unitary culture, and changing core values (Turnbull and Edwards, 2005). The language of market and business focuses on profit and bottom-line whilst that of the academe revolves around knowledge and pursuit for the truth. Of late, the growth of academic capitalism has seen the growing dominance of the language of business.

TABLE 1: Cultural dimension score of Malaysia againts other countries/regions

Countries	PDI	IDV	MAS	UAI
World Average	**55**	**43**	**50**	**64**
United States	40	91	62	46
Canada	39	80	50	42
Latin America	**70**	**28**	**41**	**85**
Europe	**45**	**61**	**59**	**74**
Asian	**64**	**24**	**58**	**63**
Malaysia	95	30	45	40
Thailand	64	20	34	64
Indonesia	78	14	40	48
Singapore	70	15	43	4
Hong Kong	68	25	51	29
India	77	44	56	40
Arab Countries	**80**	**38**	**52**	**68**

PDI=Power Distance Index; higher values indicate greater inequality in power

IDV=Individualism; higher scores indicative of individual needs domiate collective needs

MAS=Masculinity; higher scores reflect more tasks supersede consideration

UAI=Uncertainty Avoidance Index; higher scores indicative of less risk tolerance

Source: Hofstede, 2001. Retrieved 23 February 2008 from http://www.geert-hofstede.com/

The tension between freedom and structure revolves around the issue of autonomy, the fundamental aspect of academic and managerial identity of a university (Birnbaum, 1992; Brown and Moshavi, 2002). Academics see themselves as self-employed people, working independently or in groups; whereas the administrative role of leadership demands a certain degree of structure.

HEIs typically have two subcultures; the academic and administrative support subcultures. This fragmented culture creates tensions that are crucial in leading change in HEIs (Turnbull and Edwards, 2005). The tensions emanating from this dual control system result in leaders creating empires, with their own agenda. The leadership challenge then becomes the identification of these subcultures and unifying them to a common purpose.

Alternatively, the challenges to leadership in HEIs can be viewed from a knowledge-based view (KBV), that sees an organisation as collections of knowledge and therefore leading and managing HEIs revolves around the management of knowledge resources (Kogut and Zander, 1992; Grant, 1996). The effectiveness of leaders in HEIs is seen from their ability to nurture and create environments that meet the learning needs of others, including cultural awareness, acceptance of multiple intelligences and ways of knowing, strategic thinking, engagement and a sense of collective collaborators in developing knowledge and active research (Amey, 2006). With this perspective, managing and leading HEIs focuses on knowledge management.

In sum, the leadership of HEIs as seen from the knowledge-based view revolves around the managing and leading of the knowledge management processes to achieve organisational goals in an academic (knowledge) culture that focuses on seeking the truth and complete autonomy in pursuing this agenda.

Conclusion

In HEIs, leaders' use of bases of power determines their effectiveness in effecting desired subordinates' behaviour, attitudes and actions. However, the cultural contexts, particularly the national culture and that of the academe, are important situational factors.

A society that is hierarchical with patronage norms typically works on legitimate or position power to effect change. This, however, is antithesis to the academic norms of autonomy and freedom to pursue ones' interest in the generation, dissemination and use of knowledge. The imposition of accountability and academic capitalism further challenges this fundamental value of the academe. The juxtaposition of these two cultures further complicates the effectiveness of leadership behaviour in HEIs in the Malaysian setting. These two cultures have contradictory effects on the effectiveness of each of these bases of power. Which culture dominates will determine the overall effectiveness.

We are a long way towards fully understanding leadership issues in higher education in Malaysia. The complex and dynamic environment that HEIs are currently operating in makes leadership research very challenging. It is therefore imperative that research on leadership issues be continuously undertaken to provide support to current and future leaders in their engagement of the academe.

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