Participative and Effective Community Leadership Practice in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

This article discussed effective leadership from various theories. The dominant ideas on leadership initially begin with the traits theory, followed by behavior theory, situational theory and integrative theory. In analyzing these theories, one key theme emerged that contribute to effective leadership. It is the participative leadership style that was used in various forms such as the democratic, people-oriented and team leadership. Studies in Malaysia indicated that participative leadership is the key to a success of future public leadership in Malaysia. Ming-Yi Wu conducted comparative studies of participative leadership and concluded that it is culturally bound. There are differences between particpative leadership practiced in Taiwan, Japan and the United States. Furthermore, the researcher noted that most leadership studies are western biased, and thus there is a need to conduct studies in other cultures. This study focused on participative leadership among community leaders in Malaysia. It is based on a qualitative study, involving the in-depth interviews of eight Chairmen of Neighborhood Associations in Malaysia. The interview was recorded, transcribed verbatim, coded and analyzed into themes. One of the emerging themes from the findings relate to participative leadership. In conducting various leadership roles in the community, the leaders have to use the participative leadership approach in order to be more effective. However, the participation levels that the leaders can involve others in community efforts vary with situations.

Keywords: *Effective leadership; Malaysian leadership cases; Effective Malaysian leadership; Malaysian leadership practices; Leadership; Leadership in Malaysia*

INTRODUCTION

Leadership can be defined in many ways. For more than a century scholars have tried to define leadership. There have been many discussions on the definition of leadership, but they do not come to an agreement. Rightly pointed out by Bass (1990:11) "There are almost as many different definitions of leadership as there are persons who have attempted to define the concept". It is just words like love, democracy, peace and liberty. They are used by most people, but when we try to define them, and then the complexity comes. Bennis and Nanus (1985) concluded that, after examining 350 definitions of leadership in the past 75 years, there is no clear understanding that distinguishes leaders and non-leaders and more important effective leaders and non-effective leaders. Some of the key ideas of definitions of leadership include influencing others (Maxwell, 2007; Gardner, 1995; Hollander, 1978; Greenleaf, 1977),

influencing toward some kinds of goals (Northouse, 2004; Lussier & Achua, 2001; Cohen, 1990; Hersey & Blanchard, 1988), a relationship between leader and followers (Kouzes & Posner, 2007), interaction of leaders and followers (Bass, 1990), communicating a vision (Valenzuela, 2007; Adler, 2001); directing and coordinating work and activities (Fiedler, 1967; Hemphill & Coon, 1957).

Despite the multitude of ways leadership has been defined, and after reviewing some of the major definitions, we come to the conclusion that there are key elements of importance to leadership. They are: (1) Leadership is a group phenomenon – it involves the leader and followers; (2) leadership occurs in a context – a community, organization or group; (3) leadership involves influence, (4) leadership involves accomplishment of goals. Based on this understanding it can be said that leadership is about influence, and to influence, a leader must have followers and the process of influencing occurs in a context towards some kinds of goals (Abu Daud Silong, 2009).

In this research effective leadership is viewed from some theoretical perspectives and findings from research conducted in Malaysia. The dominant ideas on effective leadership initially began with the traits theory, followed by behavior theory, situational theory and integrative theory (Abu Daud Silong, 2009). The traits theory was proposed as early as the 19th century and continued until the 20th century, first focusing on the idea that leaders were born and later focusing on identifying acquired traits of leaders.

There are many traits studies being conducted such as by Stogdill (1974), Bass (1990) and Northouse (1997). They identified various traits related to leaders. In the context of Malaysia, a study by Madinah Mohamad & Abu Daud Silong (Madinah et. al., 2008) identified ten leadership traits of effective community leaders. The study indicated that effective community leaders are: (1) Acceptable to all races/groups, (2) responsible, (3) can be trusted, (4) highly committed, (5) honest, (6) fair to all races, (7) highly confident, (8) flexible, (9) calm in facing crisis and (10) highly disciplined. Basically, these findings are in agreement with most studies on leadership traits that have been identified thus far. When the traits are ranked, the most important characteristic is acceptability by all races or groups. This is because Malaysia is a multiracial society. Though traits are important, however traits alone cannot contribute to effective leadership and there are no universal traits that can be applied to all situations. Later traits studies also dispel ideas that leaders are born.

The behavior theory focuses on identifying styles of leadership conducted by groups of researchers from universities of Iowa (Lewin & Lippit, 1938: Lewin, Lippit & White, 1939), Ohio (Hemphill & Coons, 1957; Halpin & Winer, 1957; Flieshman, 1953) and Michigan (Likert, 1961). The Iowa studies identified three leadership styles that exist on a continuum, from the autocratic to democratic and finally laissez faire styles. On the hand, the Ohio and Michigan studies identified two major leadership styles; task-oriented and people-oriented styles. Other researchers such as Blake and Mouton (1961) expanded the findings of the Ohio and Michigan studies and develop the Leadership Grid which described five styles of leadership - impoverished leadership, authority-compliant leadership, middle of the road leadership, country club leadership and team leadership. Other researchers such as Mintzberg (1973) and Yukl (1994) went on to identify behaviors related to roles of leaders.

The situational theories such as proposed by Fielder (1967), House (1971) and Hersey and Blanchard (1969, 1977, 1988) emphasized matching leadership styles and situations. In these models, Fielder identified two styles of leadership, the task-motivated and relationship-motivated styles that should be matched to situational control. House in his path-goal theory identified four styles of leadership that should be matched to subordinates' characteristics, nature of task and the work environment. On the other hand, Hersey and Blanchard proposed the Leadership Situational Model that identified four leadership styles that should be suited to the subordinates' developmental levels. In most cases,

community leaders in Malaysia need to take into consideration of the needs and backgrounds of the followers in using the appropriate leadership styles.

Finally the integrative theory includes Burns' (1978) transactional and transformational leadership and Greenleaf's servant leadership that emphasized empowering followers. According to Burns most leaders are transactional in nature. However, transformational leadership involves motivating and inspiring in ways beyond exchanges and rewards. In order for transformational leaders to have the greatest impact on followers, they must motivate the followers to action by appealing to shared values and by satisfying their aspirations and expectations. Whereas, servant leadership as proposed by Greenleaf are those who put people's interests and aspirations above their own. They desire to serve first than to lead (Greenleaf, 1977; 1996).

PARTICIPATIVE LEADERSHIP

Based on the above theoretical perspectives, one important theme emerged that can contribute to effective leadership practice. This is the participative leadership style. It is an approach that is being practiced in different forms such as the democratic style (Lewin, 1938), people-oriented or relationship style as indicated by the Ohio (Hemphill & Coons, 1957; Halpin & Winer, 1957; Flieshman, 1953) and Michigan (Likert, 1961) studies, team leadership style as mentioned by Blake & Mouton (1961), team leadership (DuBrin, 1998; Northouse, 1997), empowering others as mentioned by Burn (1978) in his transformational leadership style and Greenleaf (1997) in his servant leadership. In the situational leadership theories House (1971) and Hersey & Blanchard also emphasized on participative leadership styles. All leadership theories mentioned participative leadership style that is considered as a more effective approach to leadership (Table 1). Burn (1978) also discussed on moral and amoral leader. To be effective a leader must have moral values, otherwise he or she is not considered a leader (Abu Daud Silong, 2009).

Table 1: Leadership Theories and Effective Leadership Practice

Leadership theories	Effective leadership practice (more participative approach)
Lewin leadership theory : identified three leadership styles that include autocratic, democratic and laissez faire	Democratic style is considered more effective
Ohio and Michigan studies identified two major leadership styles: people-oriented and task-oriented	People-oriented style is considered more effective
Blake and Mouton mentioned five leadership styles: impoverished leadership, authority-compliance leadership, middle of the road leadership, country club leadership and team leadership	Team leadership is considered most ideal
House path-goal theory and Hersey-Blanchard situational leadership theories mentioned various leadership styles from being very directive in nature to a more supportive and participative approach	Effectiveness depends on situations. Participative approach involves subordinates in decision making
Burn's transformational leadership	Focus on empowering others
Greenleaf's servant leadership	Focus on empowering others
DuBrin team leadership	Leaders serve as facilitators in bringing out the best in others
Burn's moral leadership	Focus on positive traits and values in leaders

Research on leadership behaviors since the 1930s until the end of the century found that various styles were adopted by leaders. Evidence indicates that the particpative style is more effective leadership behavior. According to University of Iowa studies, leadership behavior range from autocratic to democratic to laissez faire behaviors. Autocratic leaders are those emphasizing on centralized power, democratic are more participative in nature while laissez faire are considered non-leadership because there is little guidance provided. On the other hand, the Michigan and Ohio studies identified two major behaviors related to task-oriented and people-oriented style. The people oriented style is focused on getting participation from others in decision making process. Mouton and Blake also indicate that people oriented style of team leadership is more participative and the ideal approach to leadership. Mintzberg and Yukl focused on roles of leadership that implied some forms of participative leadership. In the Malaysian scenario, Madinah Mohamad et al. (2008) found that the democratic style that involves two-way is the most effective for a multiracial community. The study also identified various roles of community leaders. On the other hand, Abu Daud Silong et al. (2008) indicated that the public sector leadership should change their traditional roles of command and control to more collaborative roles.

Ming-Yi Wu (2006), after comparing empirical studies of participative leadership theories in three cultures – the United States, Japan and Taiwan came to the conclusion that participative leadership is culturally bound. In other words "participative leadership varies from culture to culture" (Ming-Yi Wu, 2006: 26). For example in Taiwan the power distance is high and thus leadership is more of directive in nature rather than participative. However, in the US participative leadership is well-recognized and accepted by organizations and they practiced various participation programs in the workplace. In Japan, Hirokawa indicated that Japanese use the communication participative style in their leadership function (Ming-Yi Wu, 2006). Japanese organizations are more effective because leaders encourage the flow of information and adopt the bottom-up process in decision making.

Studies on leadership are dominated by western scholars (Ming-Yi Wu, 2006). Thus there is a need to add further understanding on leadership studies and practices from other countries. This paper attempts to discuss Malaysian empirical cases and practices that relates to effective leadership in the form of participative leadership.

Recent phenomena indicate that the leadership style in the Malaysian public sector needs to change. In the past, leadership in the Malaysian public sector has always relied on a strong and command style. But to remain relevant in the 21st century, the leadership style has to change to a more collaborative and participative style (Abu Daud Silong, 2008; Tam, 2008).

In the traditional role, the relationship between the leader and followers is based on the leader's authority and the subservience of the followers to that authority, where there is big power distance. In such situation, leaders were considered to be very few at the top in higher positions within the hierarchy. Usually, leaders "set goals, explains plans and strategies, organizes and coordinates activities, motivates efforts, and evaluates performance of members. In short, the role of the traditional leader is to take unilateral and decisive action" (Tam, 2008). These were more aligned to the autocratic style as mentioned by Lewin (1938), task-oriented style as identified by the Ohio and Michigan studies, and more production-centered as indicated by Mouton and Blake (1961). These were less effective leadership approaches.

But in the 21st century, leadership in the public sector will require leadership style that is more participative and collaborative in nature. Leadership not only involves the top levels but also at all levels of the hierarchy such as the middle and the junior levels. The leadership roles include that of being the facilitator, communicator, problem-solver, team leader, coach, change agent and mentor.

Empirical evidence (Abu Daud Silong, 2008) indicated that leaders should encourage subordinates to participate in decision making through roles that focus on engaging others in planning, implementing and monitoring work activities. Respondents of a research conducted in the public sector (Abu Daud Silong, 2008) emphasized that leaders should "accept opinions from junior officers, cooperate with others, delegate, be good listener, be open-minded, communicate and focus on team work, listen to views and comments of subordinates, meet with subordinates, and mix freely with others"

In using the participative approach, leaders must also be able to provide excellent public service. The leader must be able to achieve the vision and mission of the public sector organization and develop high performance among the staff. Being a public service leader, who often interacts with people, he/she must also practice leadership with high integrity, good values and attributes.

METHODOLOGY

This article is based on a study that explores the experiences of eight community leaders in Malaysia. The sample of the study is Chairmen of Neighborhood Associations in the state of Penang, Malaysia. The research was conducted together with the Department of National Unity and Integration (locally abbreviated and known as JPNIN) Malaysia. Initially the researchers and officers from JPNIN identified 15 names to be included in the study based on the leaders' track records in conducting their service to the community. Finally, after contacting all the potential respondents only eight agreed to be interviewed.

The eight respondents consist of community leaders who came from different racial background – four Malays, two Chinese and two Indians. There is also one female among the respondents. Generally they are quite elderly with an average age of 51.9 years, the youngest being 43.0 years and the oldest 63.0 years old. Most have high school education with only one with tertiary education. They have an average age of 16.0 years of experience in the Association. Two of the respondents were pensioners, one worked with the public sector, one worked with the private sector, one worked as a pre-school teacher and three were self-employed. All the respondents were married with one to four children (Table 2).

Table 2: Profile of Respondents

	R1	R2	R3	R4	R5	R6	R7	R8
P	Chairman	Chairman	Chairman	Chairman	Chairman	Chairman	Chairman	Chairman
A	56	49	59	49	43	63	53	43
S	Male	Male	Male	Male	Male	Male	Female	Male
E	High school	High school	High School	High school	Tertiary education (Diploma)	High school	High school	Lower Sec. school
R	Malay	Indian	Malay	Malay	Indian	Malay	Chinese	Chinese
Ex	25	25	25	8	18	4	20	3
Em	Pensioner	Public sector	Own Business	Own business	Private sector	Pensioner	Teacher (Preschool)	Self-employed
M	Married	Married	Married	Married	Married	Married	Married	Married
C	4	2	3	3	3	4	1	1
Average age : 51.9 years								
Average experience with Neighborhood Associations: 16.0 years								

Keys:

R1 – R8: Respondent 1 to 8
P – Position in Neighborhood Association
A – Age in years
S – Sex, male or female; Lower sec. school – Lower secondary school
E – Education level
R – Race: Malay, Chinese, Indian
Ex – Experience in Neighborhood Association in years
Em – Employment, with public sector, private sector, own business or self-employed
M – Marital status
C – Number of children

The data were collected using an interview guide developed by the researchers. The guide was pre-tested and the questions were improved based on feedback of the pre-test. The in-depth interviews were conducted for about two to three hours at locations of the respondents' convenience such as their offices or homes. The interviews were conducted until no more new data emerged. Sometimes re-arrangements have to be made to accommodate emerging needs of the respondents. The interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, coded and analyzed according to themes.

Also it is important to note a brief profile of the communities that is being studied. All the communities were multi-racial groups, four with Chinese majority, and three with Malay majority and none with Indian majority. One respondent did not furnish data related to the community. Most were low or average income groups working in the public and private sectors as well as self-employed.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Turning to the context of a community, empirical evidences also indicated that the practice of participative approach will lead to more effective leadership. Community leaders in Malaysia performed various roles such as leading a multi-racial team, change agent, problem-solver, negotiator, planning and conducting community programs, communicator, resource-linker and manager (Madinah Mohamad, 2008). In approaching those leadership roles, empirical evidences indicated that the leaders often have to use participative approach in order to be effective.

Below are some of the responses of the in-depth interviews of eight Chairmen of Neighborhood Associations in Malaysia:

In solving racial problems in the community; Call the parties involved, sit down and discuss with them, get views from the other committee members and also views of officer from the Department of National Unity and Integration [locally abbreviated and known as JPNIN]. After discussion, the officer from JPNIN will provide some explanation on racial unity, get feedback from all parties involved and get agreement from the conflicting parties on settling the problem.

The committee members of the Association and the Chairman together assist in solving community problems.

In bringing about change for the community; Try to get agreement from the members of the community, through giving out written notices, committee members of the Association, and other NGO leaders about the change… every change that is going to be implemented will be discussed in the meeting with committee members.

Working in a team; Important to have a team with high commitment and sincerity in conducting volunteer work then only we can have active team…Example: Voluntary Patrolling Scheme by members of community need their voluntary participation that work in teams, and there should be no conflicts in the teams.

In conducting social and volunteer work; Community leaders must practice good social behaviors with the community members… always on good terms, willing to help the local community and have an open attitude towards the people

In making decision; Accept ideas from members of the community…also evaluate those ideas according to situations.

Practicing good values; Always show good characters and values to the people so that they will follow your leadership… require traits such being tolerant and flexible to handle people of various races such as being fair when providing services to all races.

Based on those responses, the study indicated that for leaders to perform their leadership roles well they have do various things together with the people such as" sit down; discuss; get views; get feedback; get explanation; get agreement; build a team; get voluntary participation; accept ideas; and show good characters such as being tolerant and flexible". As community leaders they have to solve community problems, communicate to others, bring change, make decision, be a resource-linker and make decision. To do an effective job, community leaders cannot be autocratic and too task-oriented in their approach. These styles will be ineffective in leading a community. They need to engage others in any community work that they are conducting. In this aspect, the study suggested that they are five levels of participation in community work (Figure 1)

1. The leader decides most things which mean there is no or very little participation of others in the decision making.
2. The leader proposes the decision but invites comments, listen to feedback and ideas from others before deciding
3. Others propose the decision but the leader has the final decision
4. The leader make the decision jointly with others as equals
5. The leaders empowers others to make the decision

A community leader with participative style, rather than calling all the "shots" alone, seeks to involve others in the process of conducting the various leadership roles for the community. They will include others in making decision related to the community such as other committee members of the Association, members of the community, the relevant parties, and others outside the community. In terms of involving others in the process of conducting community work, the leader can be considered as non-participative or highly participative (Figure 1). They make want to retain all the decision to themselves (Level 1) or they want to adopt a highly participative approach by empowering others to make the decision (Level 5). In between these two levels, we have some levels of participation, progressing to Level 2, Level 3 and Level 4 respectively (Figure 1). As we move from Level 1 to the next level until Level 5, there is increasing participation of others in the decision process.

However, participation may depend on the situation. Hersey and Blanchard indicated that styles of leadership depend on the maturity of followers. If the followers are new and not quite sure how to do the job then we cannot empower. There must be more guidance from the leader and most likely Level 2 or Level 3 is more suitable. House suggested that of leadership should also take into consideration of the work environment and the tasks themselves. There are situations that need to be considered in using the various levels of participation in community work. Further research may be needed here. Thus, it is not necessarily that Level 5 is the best style of participative leadership, but we have to look at the situations. However, the research did indicate that the participative approach results in more effective leadership.

Abu Daud Silong (2007), in evaluating community project in Malaysia mentioned the lack of participation of community members in planning, conducting and evaluating community programs. There is a high tendency to approach community development in Malaysia by using the "top-down" approach rather than "bottom-up" approach. As a result community efforts, especially implemented by government

agencies are more likely to fail rather than succeed. Community leaders need to involve the people early, especially in the planning stage. Too often members of the community are involved only when the programs are being implemented. As such there is low commitment from the people in the program.

< Less participative   **Highly participative >**

Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5
Autocratic decision by leader	Leader proposes decision – invites comments and listen to feedback and ideas and then decides.	Others propose decision but the leader has the final say	Leader makes joint decision with others	Empower others to make a responsible decision

Figure 1: Levels of Participation in Leading a Community

IMPLICATIONS

Theories indicated that more participative approach results in more effective leadership. Participative styles such as democratic, people-oriented and team leadership result in better performance according to behavioral theories. Recent theories, such as servant and transformational leadership, also provide emphasis on empowering others to get better results. However, according to Ming-Yi Wu (2006) participative leadership is culturally bound. This paper implied that participative leadership is applied according to situation. In the Malaysian public sector, in the past command and control leadership style is considered effective. It is suitable for that period where strong decisive leadership is required. With greater openness, more educated public, and greater ICT utilization, the people demand for more participation in the decision making process. As such more collaborative style is preferable in the 21st century for public sector leadership.

Turning to the situation of community in Malaysia, participative leadership is considered more desirable, especially when it involves voluntary community work. In performing their roles as leaders there is a strong need to involve others in the process. Involvement of people such as the committee members of the Association, members of the community and other relevant parties will ensure better results. However, the participative approach will be more effective if it is applied according to situations such as proposed by Fiedler, House and Hersey and Blanchard. This research suggested that community levels can involve others in decision making according to various levels, from less participative to highly participative depending on situations. Hersey and Blanchard suggested that particpative approach depends on the developmental stage of the followers; Fiedler suggested that it depends on situational control while House proposed that it depends on the followers' characteristics, nature of the tasks and work environment. However, further research is needed in this area, to understand the various situations that may enhance participative leadership style.

Due to ever increasing process of globalization and internationalization, there is a need to understand leadership across various situations such as cultures. There is also a need for global leaders, where leadership knowledge in other situations can provide guide for leaders to lead people in other cultures and countries. There is also a need to develop studies to compare participative leadership style and effectiveness across cultures. For Malaysia this may be important since it is a multi-racial community. Leading a multi-racial group is a key to success in community development efforts in Malaysia.

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