SOCIAL SCIENCES & HUMANITIES

Championing TVET Malaysia through Leadership, A Malaysian Leader's Experience

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ABSTRACT

Societal stigma attached to Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) is difficult to erase. Many around the world have labelled vocationaleducation as an unpromising field and a place to pool non-performers. Although much has been done to promote TVET as legitimate education,the negative perception lingers in the mind of many. Gradually, that negative perception is being discarded as many becomeaware ofthe benefitsof TVET. This paper explores the leadership approach of champions of TVET based on their true experience of championing TVET in Malaysia. Malaysian TVET leaders have demonstrated transformational leadership and have won awards locally and globally..

Keywords: Championing TVET (Technical and Vocational Education and Training),leadership,transformational approach

INTRODUCTION

Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) has been thought as the only salvation for under-achievers, non-performers and the"forever dead" (Brennan, 2014). Ever since TVET was branded as being an unreliable option in education and an unprofitable career path, truly resourceful personnel have gone to work to raise its image and prove its credibility (Hallinger, 2014). The champions of TVET have been effective change agents in pushing it as a reliable option in Higher Education (Hallinger, 2014). Northouse(2013) classified change agents as role models who portray good character, can create and articulate a clear vision for an organisation, provide empowerment to followers to meet higher standards, gather trust from followers to build integrity and give meaning to organisational life.

The pivotal role of leaders, especially those who reform,is to propel transformation. It appears that the champions of TVET have put in amazing effort to reform it (Brennan, 2014). Many studies on leadership do not integrate what is known, what has been possessed and what the theory says (Van der Mescht, 2004). Studies on leadership in TVET mainly coverdeans, instructors, trainers and studentsand give very little space to higher ranking leaders (Rabindarang, 2014; Sirat, 2012). This has created a gap in the literature as there is little written on top management. The process of transformation in TVET was urged by challenges inside and outside the field and this led to explorations of leaders dealt with such pressure(Brennan, 2014; Wilson, 1993).This study looks at the extraordinary experience of champions of TVET in Malaysia and how their transformational leadership has impacted the field.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed qualitative research methodology usingphenomenological inquiry. Qualitative research is best employed when 'Yes' and 'No' answers would notbe sufficient. Qualitative research is a means to gain understanding of meaning from individuals or people through exploration thatinvolves questions and procedures and data that are typically collected in participant settings(Creswell, 2009). The inquiry of leadership characteristics requires researchers to uncoverthe lived experience of participants; this makes phenomenological

inquiry the most appropriate design for this research. A phenomenon is 'a thing in itself'. This type of research inquiry fits the search for meaning, structure and the essence of lived experience of individuals or groups of people in the phenomenon they wish to understand (Aspers, 2009).

Interview Protocol

The in-depth interview allows participants to share their experience. To conduct an in-depth interview, the researcher outlines an interview protocol for both the researcher and the participant to adhere to. The interview protocol consists of three sections, namely,the introduction, the questions and the closing. In the introduction section, details such as the participant's name, designation, the venue, time and date arerecorded. The introduction section also informsthe participant ofthe aim of the study along with the benefits and potential risks that might arise from their participation.

Sampling

This study followed the recommendation of qualitative research experts that the number of sampling in qualitative research does not matter because of the uniqueness ofthe design itself. It could range from one to hundreds. More importantly, the subjects must be individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon being explored and can articulate their lived experience. The more diverse the characteristics of the individuals, the more difficult it will be for the researcher to find common experiences, themes and an

overall essence of experience that would cover all the participants (Creswell, 2009).

The application of purposive sampling fit the study well. When developing a purposive sample, researchers use their special knowledge or expertise about agroup to select subjects who represent the population (Saldana, 2009). Participantsinthis study possesseda greater amount of experience asall of them were higher ranking leaders in organisations andinstitutions in Malaysia. They could actually recountthe experience of championing organisations inMalaysia from scratch, how policy wasbuilt in the earlystages of the organisation'sstart up and who the experts of the organisation in Malaysia were. There were three participants who occupied the top position in various organisations and they had more than 11 years of leadership experience. The identity of the participants are protected through anonymouslabelling as L1, L2 and L3.

Data Analysis

The transcription of the interview lasting two and a half hours provided a bulk of findings. The information provided encompassed true meaning, hidden meaning and explicit and implicit values. Each component was scrutinised thoroughly during data analysis. Data processing was conducted manually.

Numerous types of data coding can be applied in qualitative research; we picked open coding, attribution coding and feeling coding forthe first cycle. In the second cycle, we employed pattern coding to get the categorisation of the coded data. The second cycle began with pattern coding to group all the coded data into smaller sets. This happened in analysis to draw out various themes where we couldtransform raw data into manageable form. The findings on transformational leadership with components classifiedare presented in Table 1.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study looked at leadership approach. Table 1 presents personal outcome (followership) andthreetransformational components (inspirational motivation, idealised influenced and intellectual stimulation) and one transformational strategy (creative deployment).

Table 1
Personal Outcome

Approach	Verbatim Quotes
Followership (Willing follower, gaining support from followers and gaining commitment from subordinates)	"I think that would entail you being able to influence ya…to move things…I mean you cannot be a leader if you do not have followers, you need to have team, people, followers, members that you can influence and which you can motivate, and get them to move along with you" *(L3)*

The excerpt proves that leaders assume that to be a transformational leader entails gaining followers, acquiring trust and working in harmony as a team to achieveexcellence in TVET. Followership is important to a leader and the organisation for achieving exemplary leadership includes challenging the existing process and status quo, creating a shared vision by looking ahead to the future and sharing goals (Marinova, Van Dyne, & Moon, 2015).

Paying heed to the power of personal outcomes mentioned, transformational leaders can influence and motivate the behaviour of employees in such a way that the resultant behaviour has a positive impact on the organisation. Transformational leadership facilitates the creation of harmonious leader-follower relationships particularly for job design and job performance (Rowley, 2012). Thus, L3 in the excerpt given in Table 1 emphasised gaining followers as this helps to propel forward the organisation's vision together with the cooperation of all.

Table 2
Personal Outcome

Approach	Verbatim Quotes
Inspirational motivation (Communicate high expectation to followers, inspire them through motivation to become committed and share the vision)	"So far, we managed them to get them understanding enough but as a person I realised that I really organised to place family as closed as possible but education system is the same everywhere." *(L1)*
	"To me, I play my role, I do things accordingly and then I fulfil my people, I give full support." *(L2)*
	"Every new officer will come here for example. I will them, 'You have a chance here to change lives, you have a chance to make difference, regardless whether you are." *(L3*)

In the context of inspirational motivation, leaders have their own way in providing meaning and challenge their followers work. The spirit of enthusiasm and optimism can be sparked when leader always communicate their expectation and demonstrated their commitment towards the shared vision. As excerpted from L1, leaders were found to be concern, sympathy and empathy on the wellbeing of his subordinate when they are placed far from the family. Besides the hurdles, leader motivate the employees that they have to adapt and cope with the current systems as at the end, it will benefited people.Inspirational motivation describe the transformational approach are characteristically drawn towards providing best managerial behaviour that will encourage the employee to offer more of his energies towards work (Bass, 1999).

L2 identified his inspirational motivation as give them full support to be committed as they preferred in a way can satisfy them. Meanwhile, the inspirational

motivation from the source quoted in L3 demonstrated that he is being compassion by putting the remarks of pull out life from poverty and chances of ordinary people to make changes.Inspirational motivation facilitates in more conducive learning environment in organisation and it creates sharing knowledge among members (Akpotu&Amadi, 2013).

Table 3
Idealised Influence

Approach	Verbatim Quotes
Idealised influence (Charisma includes being firm and encouraging, setting an example, being optimistic anda decision maker, mobilising resources and transforming situations)	"I have to take pride, my personal responsibility are delivering excellence, so when you want to be excellence, you must go for new ideas, see what is out there, you cannot do business as usual." *(L1)*
	"We don't have one prescriptive ways on how doing it, all the directors have their own way and of course they have to abide the treasury guidelines, but they can adjust." *(L1)*
	"Some need to be enhance, some need to be reminded, some need to be trained, so part of the positive culture is everyone must be trained, must be given the opportunity to excel and not just be happy with basic qualification." *(L2)*

Idealised influence portrays leaders as beingcharismatic who instil pride and respect in their followers and who gain thetrust of their followers for TVET reformation. Charismaticleaders display the attributes of vision, trust, respect, risk-sharing and integrity.In the excerpt above, L1 seems a wise decision maker as he tweaks changes to fit the system. Idealised influence in leadership also involves integrity in the form of ethical and moral conduct (Bass, 1999). Such a portrayal shows the ability of leaders to abide by the rules and, at the same time, be flexible. Idealised influence is the charismatic element of transformational leadership in which leaders become role models who are admired, respected and emulated by their followers (Stone, Russell, & Patterson, 2004).

L2 believed that he portrayed the charismatic approach by being positive and firm about TVET programmes. Idealised influence encourages employees to offer more of theirenergies towards work(Akpotu&Amadi, 2013). L2 is a motivation booster as he offers constant motivation and always reminds everyone to go beyond their comfort zone.

Table 4
Intellectual Stimulation

Approach	Verbatim Quotes
Intellectual stimulation (Stimulation for both leader and follower to become creative and innovative, challenge their own beliefs and values and be empowered)	"I think you may have to give the trust, you have to give the autonomy, the leeway to your colleagues to try new things. Just go out and do it. That is why we challenged them. Change! Try to do it differently, make mistakes never mind, we rectify it." *(L3)*

Intellectual stimulation pictured in the findings indicates the degree to which the leader challenges assumptions, takes risks and solicits followers' ideas. Leaders with this style stimulate and encourage creativity in their followers. They nurture and develop people who think independently. Transformational leaders stimulate their followers' efforts to be innovative and creative by questioning assumptions, reframing problems and approaching old situations in new ways (Stone, Russell, & Patterson, 2004). L3 identified his intellectual stimulation as being creative and innovative by gearing various initiatives to lift up the image of TVET, give autonomy to subordinates to think and act and push them to achieve more in terms of education or promotions and challenge their thinking. Transformational leadership is concerned with the process of how certain leaders are able to inspire followers to accomplish great things (Northouse, 2013).

Table 5
Intellectual Stimulation

Approach	Verbatim Quotes
Creative deployment (Assessing strengths and weaknesses)	"You can sense it so leaders should be able to hopefully sense what is right, what is working or what is not working and tweak it accordingly. It is not just one way, there are so many ways and many paths to achieve the greatness of success." *(L1)*

Creative deployment is the strategy used by leaders as excerpted in the findings, whereby leaders focussed on their strength and nottheir weaknesses.Creative deployment involves leader showing self-competence in dwelling with weaknesses and strengths (Northouse, 2013). They express creative deployment as the ability to become adaptive if something unexpected occurs and adjust the way they perform based on the changes that happen. Creative deployment emphasises their strengths rather than dwells on their weaknesses based on theawareness of their own competence.Effective leaders

areable to immerse themselves in their tasks and the overarching goals of their organisations (Stone, Russell, & Patterson, 2004).

CONCLUSION

The transformational leadership approach delineates the extraordinary characteristics possessed by higher ranking leaders consisting of followership, inspirational motivation, idealised influence and creative deployment. The verbatim quotes proved that all three leaders championing TVET in Malaysia who were included in this study were doing so by recognising their followers' needs and then defining the exchange process for meeting those needs. Apart from gaining the trust, commitment and cooperation of their followers, they demonstratedthe appropriateactions of leaders that can inspire others in their pursuit of knowledgeand meaning. They were effective role modelsas they were charismatic leaders who possessed integrity. Championing TVET in Malaysia has faced many difficulties. The leaders of TVET in Malaysia have been encouraging innovation and creativity in thinking and action.

This exploration was based exclusively on the lived experience of three higher ranking leaders ofTVET in Malaysia. Their experience can help us understand better the characteristics of leadership in TVET and how these leadersconductthemselves in facing the challenges of TVET in Malaysia. It is recommended for future studies to employ other qualitative research inquiries with a bigger sample size and to go beyond the prescribed leadership approach for new discoveries. This study proves that the role of followers isnot to be neglected, thus, it is suggested that in future, the voice of followers be included for exploration. These findings cannot be generalised to a bigger population as it draws from minimal sources.

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