

# Exploring Mahathir's Leadership Communication Attributes from Indian Community Perspective

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**ABSTRACT:** Literatures proposed that culture does influence the success of leadership communication. Mahathir as the longest serving Prime Minister of Malaysia was criticised to be a leader who promotes the betterment of the majority community that he represented and marginalised the Indians. Despite of that, the Indians in Malaysia showed advancement in various sectors including politics, economy and social. Therefore, this exploratory study aims to bridge the gap by investigating the attributes that link between Mahathir's leadership communication and Indian community. Data were collected through a series of intensive interviews with 15 informants consists of Indian political, non-governmental organisation and community representatives. Based on the thematic analysis, two main attributes that strongly link to Indian culture were identified: leadership communication conception (*Sattava Guna*) and characteristics of good leadership communication (*Sattava* characteristics). This study has contributed to enhance understanding about the leadership communication concept from the Indians' perspective. It provides some insights on the Indian's cultural conceptions of inter-ethnic leadership communication.

## INTRODUCTION

Researches on transformational leadership theory for more than twenty-five years proved the effect of transformational leadership on followers' attitude and behaviours (Mhatre & Riggio, 2014) and it was evident that there is sufficient conceptual gap in understanding the functionality of transformational leadership theory (Yukl 2006; van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013). However, it was found that research investigating the transformational leadership theory from a contextual perspective was still underdeveloped, specifically the type of leaders' behaviour in a cultural context and how does it affects followers was still not fully explored (Ayman, & Korabik, 2010). Consistent with the idea, Burns (1978) indicated that transformational leadership theory which explains the quality of a leader who possesses cultural knowledge of his followers will be able to promote the betterment among followers. It was further supported by Kanungo and Misra (2004) who stated that transformational leadership is influenced by culture. Further,

Singh and Bhandarker (1990) also strongly asserted that the change in society by a leader would be successful when a leader able to identify the culture of his or her followers. However, it was apparent that fewer studies have been conducted focusing on transformational leadership theory on the cultural context, specifically exploring transformational leadership theory in a multicultural context (Lynn-Sze & Ahmad, 2017; Yukl, 2006). Studies conducted mainly focused on western based context and treated the society as homogenous, such as GLOBE study (Hofstede & Minkov, 2010). However, scholars argued that the leadership outcome varies across cultural context or heterogeneous society. For instance, Graen (2006) criticizes the multicultural perspective that was overlooked in GLOBE study. This is consistent with the discussion by Bass (1990) and Chemers and Ayman (1993) who stated that leadership prototypes and conceptions vary from one culture to another and they have dramatically brought different implications in different multicultural contexts. Andreouli (2013) also

pointed out that many researchers failed to discuss the diversity of society. Indeed, it shows the need to explore transformational leadership theory in a multi-cultural context or heterogeneous society.

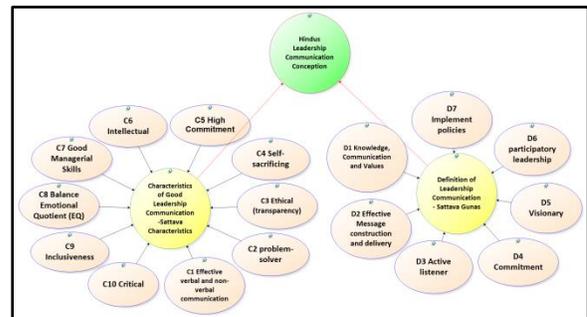
Cultural sensitivity or inter-ethnic relations is a major challenge to the social stability of Malaysia (Baharuddin, 2005). Mahathir as the longest serving Prime Minister has been viewed as a leader who was more concerned with the majority community (Malay communal) that he represented and marginalized the Indian communal in Malaysia (Wain, 2012). However, interestingly, despite many issues under the leadership of Mahathir, the Indian community in Malaysia recorded improvements in various fields (see Table 7 Incidence of Poverty by Ethnic Group, Strata and State, Malaysia, 1970-2014, for complete data) and secondly, the cultural sensitivity among non-Muslim towards Muslims was better (Saad, 2012). This situation could be explained through leadership communication theories such as transformational leadership theory which explains that culture play an important role in facilitating the leadership communication process between leader and follower, for instance, the quality of a leader who possesses cultural knowledge of his followers will be able to promote betterment of followers (Kanungo & Misra, 2004; Bakar, Jian & Fairhurts, 2014). Lynn-Sze, Yusof and Ahmad (2014) also strongly asserted that the change in society by a leader would be successful when a leader is able to identify the culture of his or her followers. Thus, this study aims to explore the Indians' leadership communication conceptions towards the leadership communication of Mahathir from the Indian cultural (Hindu) perspective.

**METHODOLOGY**

This study employed the qualitative method to examine the way the Indians perceive leadership communication from the Indian cultural (Hindu) perspective. Qualitative methods enable research studies to capture the complexity of leadership and follower dynamics, including the cultural context (Gordon & Yukl, 2004). Further, qualitative research is a dynamic method focused on getting an insight of the

meaning of a phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). This study depends on the descriptions of the lived experience of the Indians and how meaning is constructed within the Indian cultural context (Cole & Knowles, 2001). Therefore, it is clear that qualitative design assisted the researcher in exploring the cultural (Hinduism) perspective of the Indian community towards Mahathir's leadership communication, specifically the way the Indians perceive Mahathir's leadership communication from the Indian cultural perspective (Hindu). In order to get a holistic perspective on leadership communication from Indians cultura (Hindu) perspective, 12 research informants who are Indian political leaders and non-governmental organisations were selected using purposive sampling and semi-structured interviews were used based on recommendation by Patton (2002). Thematic analysis was used to identify, analyse and create a theme for the data collected. Three stages of thematic analysis which are data coding stage, themes developing stage and analytical theme creating stage were applied (Thomas & Harden, 2008).

**FINDINGS**



**Figure 2.0 Indians leadership communication conception**

This chapter provides the results of data analysis obtained from the data collected from 15 informants. The study aims is to investigate the responses of Indians towards the leadership communication of Tun Mahathir from the Indians' cultural perspective. The data has been analysed using the NVivo software and the figure above was constructed. Figure 1 shows that there are three themes that could explain the

Indians' leadership communication conception.

### **Leadership Communication Conception**

Based on the findings of the present study, the Indians have indicated three main ideas in defining leadership communication which are positive attitude, effective communication skills, and leadership style. Discussing positive attitude, the study found that fulfilment of promises and being ethical as important components of leadership communication. A leader need to deliver his promises to the people and nation, and need to be an ethical leader. Secondly, in terms of effective communication skills, leadership communication involves effective communication between a leader and followers, including the establishment and articulation of vision for the society and nation, be an active listener, and able to construct and deliver messages effectively. Third, the leadership style. The finding of the present study pointed out that leadership communication involves participatory leadership style which encourages the participation of people in the leadership communication process. Relating the definition of leadership communication provided by the Indians to the definition provided by Barrett (2014) who defined leadership communication as a purposeful process of transferring meaning aimed to influence people through effective communication skills and establish positive relationship with the followers by motivating and inspiring them to action. Analysing the definition provided by Barrett (2014), there are three main components of leadership communication which found to be consistent with the definition reported in the present study; transferring meaning (communication skills: translating visions), establish positive relationship (positive attitude: fulfil promises to the people) and motivate followers to achieve shared goals

(leadership style: participatory leadership). Relating to Bhagavad-Gita, it has categorised people based on three attributes (Gunas); 'sattava', 'rajas' and 'tamas' (Chinmayananda, 2003). According to the Bhagavad-Gita, the interactions of these three attributes (Gunas) contribute to the creation of mental make-up of an individual. In general, 'Sattava Guna' is referring to the qualities of an individual who work for betterment of the people and they are self-less. They are sensitive to others' needs and work towards shared goals. 'Rajas Guna' is referring to the qualities of an individual who only think for himself or herself aiming for only ego, fame, name and power. 'Tamas Guna' is referring to the quality of an individual who are corrupted and driven by their personal interest, and willing to sacrifice anyone for his or her selfish goals. Based on the three gunas discussed, it was found that the definition of leadership communication provided by the Indians was consistent with 'Sattava Guna' which emphasized on the qualities of a leader as a person who possesses positive qualities, such as selflessness, aims to attain shared goals or vision, and works for the good of the people. The 'Sattava' attributes reflected by a leader is considered as an ethical characteristic that inspires followers can result in creation of positive perception among the follower. According to Kejriwal and Krishnan (2004), the 'Sattava Guna' proved to enhance transformational leadership that leads to change.

### **Characteristics of good leadership communication**

The present study found that the ingredient for good leadership communication comprises of three main ideas which are consistent with the definition of leadership communication of Indians. The findings of the study indicated that the Indians emphasised on the positive characters of a

leader, which includes selflessness, problem solver and ethical. A leader should communicate sincerely with the masses and work without expecting rewards, which means a leader should be able to communicate his or her ideas, vision, and policies in the interest and need of the masses or for the betterment of the society and nation. A selfless delivery, which aims for the betterment of people, will facilitate a leader to establish and maintain positive relationship with the followers. Through selfless delivery, a leader is expected to be able to identify and solve problems pertaining to the masses. The present study clearly found that a leader needs to identify the problem in the society and solve it accordingly. Regards to that, the Indians highlighted that a leader should not be corrupted and his or her leadership should be transparent. This is because the informants believe that a leader should lead by example, thus, it is important for leaders to be ethical including being transparent. Transparency is perceived as a very important component of ethics by Indians as it provides a space for the followers to judge the ethics of a leader. A study conducted by Kaur and Sinha (1992) has pointed out a few qualities that reflect 'Sattava Guna'. They are transparency, passion, and betterment. Thus, this study found that transparency element that was highlighted by informants is consistent with the 'Sattava Guna' in the Indian philosophy. It proved that transparency boost the confidence of followers towards a leader.

The second component of the characteristics of good leadership communication is leadership style. This study classified inclusiveness or participatory leadership and critical thinking as the components of good leadership communication characteristics. The study discovers that a leader should practice inclusiveness which means he or she should treat the community as one

without neglecting any groups of the community. Regards to that, a leader needs to get feedback, suggestion and treat all communities equally. In order to practice inclusiveness, a leader needs to be critical, which means he or she should be analytic in evaluating issues arise. A leader must to able make a rationale decision based on his evaluation towards certain issues. The ancient literature Bhagavad-Gita also has emphasised on social inclusiveness. In his writing on Bhagavad-Gita, Davis (2014) has highlighted the situation where Lord Krishna was born in a tribe of cowherders which was a marginal community compared to Brahmins and Kshatriyas which reflects the social inclusiveness.

The third component is communication actions. It is important for a leader to produce positive outcomes out of the leadership communication process. Hence, a leader should be always fulfil his or her promises to the people. This is a very important quality to gain the confidence and trust of the people. Other than that, a leader must be able to control and manage different situations such as economy, social, and political issues which reflects the managerial skills of a leader. Therefore, in order to manage effectively, a leader should be an intellectual and a knowledgeable person. He or she should be knowledgeable in different fields such as politics, economy, social and etc. Lastly, this study also discovers that good leadership communication characteristics also involves selfless quality. This means a leader should prioritise his work commitment or duty for his people rather than his personal matters. To be selfless or work in the interest of the people, a leader needs a balanced emotional quotient. This is to ensure a leader makes a wise and ethical decision without any biases. As highlighted in the Bhagavad-Gita, one should perform their prescribed duties, be an

example for others, and do for the good of others (Chapter 3: 20-21 Bhagavad-Gita).

## CONCLUSIONS

This study has provided evidence of the descriptions of the Indians under the leadership communication of Mahathir. The present study revealed the Indians' conception on leadership communication. It provides an insight about the Indians' conception of leadership communication which leads to the development of culture-specific leadership communication model. This study contributes to the body of knowledge, leadership communication, specifically from the followers' cultural perspective. It was evident that culture (religion philosophy) of the Indians influences their attitude and behaviour towards leadership communication for social change.

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