Soft Skills Of Leaders And School Improvement In High Performing Schools

Tang Keow Ngang a *, Siti Huwaina Mohamed b, Somprach Kanokorn c

a School of Educational Studies, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang and 11800, Malaysia
b Penaga Jaya Primary School, Penang and 13100, Malaysia
c Department of Educational Administration, Faculty of Education, Khon Kaen and 40002, Thailand

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between soft skills of headmaster and school improvement in high performing schools in Penang and Kedah state, Malaysia. Issue related to school leaders who are weak in management is very common due to lacking of soft skills. School improvement is closely related to skills possessed by leaders. This study involved 205 teachers from six High Performing Schools. This study employs the quantitative method to collect data by using a research instrument which is a questionnaire consisted of 105 items. Findings revealed that headmaster possessed high soft skills according to their teachers' perceptions in general (mean = 4.309, SD = 0.324) meanwhile mean value of school improvement was also at high level (mean = 3.839, SD = 0.295). The hypothesis test showed that all the eight components of leadership soft skills have significant, positive and moderate relationship with school improvement and the r value ranged from 0.532 to 0.657. Hopefully, headmasters do not underestimate the soft skills of leadership practices as the impacts on school improvement is significant. Therefore, headmasters are advised to utilize soft skills in their leadership practice in order to enhance school improvement.

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1. Introduction

An effective leader will give full attention to all important aspects of leadership such as leadership style, cultural knowledge and thinking, collaboration, motivation, encouragement, curriculum management and leadership empowerment in the workplace as reported by federal inspector in 2003 (Azizi et al., 2011). According to Jamilah & Yusof (2011), the success of school lies in the effectiveness of the entire system, values, beliefs, climate, spirit and

* Tang Keow Ngang. Tel.: +6-017-539-6315
E-mail address: tang@usm.my
culture of the school community. High Performing Schools (HPSs) is one of the education National Key Results Area (NKRA) aimed to boost school performance, creating a learning environment that is conducive to excellent students thus become a model to other schools (Siti Noor, 2011). Crogbie (2005) identified the skills needed by leaders which constitute many of the personal and interpersonal skills varieties. She argues that many of these skills are desired and needed by all individuals and lists the eight components of leadership soft skills. The eight components of leadership soft skills namely collaboration/teamwork, communication skills, initiative, leadership ability, people development/coaching, personal effectiveness/mastery, planning and organizing, and presentation skills. Researchers defined the eight components of leadership soft skills according to the definition given by Keow Ngang, Wallapha & Saowanee (2013). Collaboration/teamwork refers to that administrator finds common ground and cooperates to solve problems. In the same token, administrator effectively participates in meetings and groups, encourages and values diversity through understanding and appreciation of others’ personalities, concerns, feelings, thoughts, motives, needs, skills and competencies. In addition, administrator is considered as establishing consensus through group discussions, helping each person to articulate his/her own opinion, sensitive to the needs of groups and individuals, open and honest in expressing his/her thoughts, ideas and feelings, while remaining sensitive to the thoughts, ideas and feelings of others. Communication skills refer to that administrator adapts communication to listeners' needs, checking listeners' understanding by listening attentively to the complete message, restating and questioning listeners to ensure comprehension. In addition, administrator is considered as seeking to negotiating win-win solutions to issues, clarifying problems and resolving conflicts by being open and using employees productively to enhance quality of decisions. Initiative refers to that administrator recognizes and reacts to problems, is self-starting, takes actions to achieve goals beyond specific job responsibilities, is not bias in taking action, readily faces up to and takes a stand on difficult issues. Initiative also refers to that administrator makes decisions and takes actions before being directed or forced, and does things proactively. Leadership ability refers to administrator provides and communicates strategic vision to employees in order to mobilize others to act, assigns individuals suited to the job based on competencies and delegates responsibilities to optimize staff’s skills. Apart from that, administrator takes smart risks to achieve innovative and effective solutions encourages wide participation in goal setting, decision making, and problem-solving. Leadership ability also refers to administrator gives employees the authority and support to make decisions, appropriately uses and personalizes recognition and incentives to reward, sets a personal example, shows consistency and maintains high standards of integrity and ethical conduct during both good and tough times, learns from experience, gains insights from mistakes, and analyzes both successes and failures for clues to improvement. People development/coaching refers to administrator recommends and supports appropriate education/training programs, recognizes employee’s performance with positive feedback and corrective feedback to motivate employees, and focuses feedback on specific behaviour not on the individual. In addition, administrators with people development/coaching recognize exceptional contributions, and evaluate employees accurately, consistently, and on time. Personal effectiveness/mastery refers to administrator seeks to understand and exploits personal strengths and strives to build competency in areas of weakness. Similarly, an administrator having this characteristic is personally committed to and actively works to continuously improve oneself, actively pursues learning/self-development to enhance performance, actively seeks and is open to new information and feedback from others, adjusts one’s viewpoint and/or behaviour according to the situation, functions effectively, and maintains good relationships even under stressful conditions. Planning and organizing refers to administrator defines short and long-range objectives, uses other resources to achieve planned goals, prioritizes quickly in an environment with many variables, pursues tasks and goals with persistence despite daily distractions, achieves established goals by assigned deadlines, meets commitments, fulfills promises, and responds to change with flexibility and appropriate speed. Presentation skills refer to administrator has good presentation skills, presenting himself/herself in a professional manner, and creating a good first impression. Apart from that, administrator as effective in presenting ideas to others whether in individual and/or group situations, makes effective use of visual aids in presentations, thinks carefully about effect of words, vocal quality and nonverbal actions, and uses appropriate methods of persuasion to convince others to accept an idea, plan, or activity. Presentation skills also refer to administrator having good presentation skills such as invites input/questions from others, encourages open dialogue/exchange of information and ideas, listens actively, and addresses the emotional position of audience members.

The meaning of school improvement in this study was adopted from Van Velzen, Miles, Ekholm, Hameyer & Robin (1985) in their International School Improvement Program. School improvement is a sustained, systematic
effort, intended to make changes in learning and other internal related conditions with the aim ahead to implement educational goals effectively.

2. Statement of the problem

In order to realize the aspiration of education, school leader as a key person should lead the school so that it will function more properly and effectively to enhance the success of the school. However, the issue of leadership weakness among the school leaders is not a new issue. There are still a number of less-skilled school leaders due to lack of soft skills of the individual leaders (Lokman & Hairul Anuar, 2011). The biggest variables in a workplace are employees, people possessing complex needs, strengths, weaknesses, biases, and not to mention, fears. Therefore, organizational leaders need to help employees communicate, find meaning in their work, and work in cooperation with each other at a higher level. Synergized workplace elements of the leader include his or her ability to communicate, get along with different people, work as a team, infuse creativity, create an environment where people feel valued, and become eager to contribute to the organization (Tang, 2012).

3. Objectives of the study

Based on the above problem statements, this study intends to achieve the following objectives:

a. To identify the frequency implementation of the eight components of leadership soft skills by headmasters.
b. To identify the teachers' perceptions on school improvement.
c. To examine the relationship between each component of leadership soft skills and school improvement.

4. Methodology of the Study

This research is a survey using a structured self-administered mailed questionnaire to teachers in six High Performing Primary Schools (HPPSs) in Kedah and Penang state which are located in the northern part of Peninsular Malaysia. It utilizes quantitative research methodology involving a sample of 205 teachers upon a total population as 433. A purposive sampling was employed. The questionnaire was administered in two versions, English and Malay language. There were 101 items including demographic items and consists of 3 sections. Section A of the questionnaire was intended to gather information regarding demographic factors of the respondents which included information pertaining to their personal background such as their gender, age, school location and length of service. Section B was specifically designed by researchers to gauge the frequency of the headmasters' implementation of leadership soft skills at their workplace. There were eight components for leadership soft skills, each consisting of 10 items, give a total of 80 items. A five-point Likert scale was used to measure the teachers' responses towards their headmasters. Section C contained 21 items were scored using a five-point Likert scale, was related to school improvement adapted from Elizabeth A. Le Clear (2005).

5. Findings

5.1. Descriptive Statistical Analysis

Table 1 shows the mean scores and standard deviations of the frequency implementation on the eight components of leadership soft skills by headmasters. As indicated in Table 1, the mean scores for the eight components of leadership soft skills ranged from 4.086 to 4.394. This show that, the most frequently implemented leadership soft skills by headmasters was collaboration/teamwork (mean = 4.394, SD = 0.335). This is followed by leadership ability (mean = 4.393, SD = 0.349) and presentation skills (mean = 4.389, SD = 0.456). The skill least frequently implemented by headmasters was initiative (mean = 4.086, SD = 0.313). Therefore, based on Table 1, it can be concluded that headmasters, in actual situation, were implementing highly all the eight components of leadership soft skills. In addition, the mean score and standard deviation of school improvement was high from teachers' perceptions (mean = 3.839, SD = 0.295).
Table 1. Mean scores and standard deviations of the eight components of leadership soft skills

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Components of leadership soft skills</th>
<th>Mean scores</th>
<th>Standard deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration/teamwork</td>
<td>4.394</td>
<td>0.335</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership ability</td>
<td>4.393</td>
<td>0.349</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presentation skills</td>
<td>4.389</td>
<td>0.456</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People development/coaching</td>
<td>4.369</td>
<td>0.346</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication skills</td>
<td>4.332</td>
<td>0.334</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning and organizing</td>
<td>4.261</td>
<td>0.518</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal effectiveness/mastery</td>
<td>4.249</td>
<td>0.432</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initiative</td>
<td>4.086</td>
<td>0.313</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.2. Inferential Statistical Analysis

As indicated in Table 2, school improvement was significant, positive and moderately correlated with all the eight components of leadership soft skills. This means that, to a great extent, an increase in leadership ability ($r = 0.657$; $p<0.01$) is associated with an increase in the level of school improvement. This is followed by communication skills ($r = 0.643$; $p<0.01$), planning and organizing ($r = 0.637$; $p<0.01$), personal effectiveness/mastery ($r = 0.626$; $p<0.01$), presentation skills ($r = 0.602$; $p<0.01$), initiative ($r = 0.567$; $p<0.01$) and collaboration/teamwork ($r = 0.560$; $p<0.01$). However, to a least extent, an improvement in personal development/coaching ($r = 0.532$; $p<0.01$) is associated with an increase in the level of school improvement. In summary, among the eight components of leadership soft skills, leadership ability had the strongest association with school improvement while personal development/coaching had the weakest association with school improvement.

Table 2. Correlation coefficients between the eight components of leadership soft skills and school improvement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Components of leadership soft skills</th>
<th>r value</th>
<th>p value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leadership ability</td>
<td>0.657**</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication skills</td>
<td>0.643**</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning and organizing</td>
<td>0.637**</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal effectiveness/mastery</td>
<td>0.626**</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presentation skills</td>
<td>0.602**</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initiative</td>
<td>0.567**</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration/teamwork</td>
<td>0.560**</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal development/coaching</td>
<td>0.532**</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Significant at 0.01

6. Discussion and Conclusion

This study proves that there is the influence of leadership soft skills practices with school improvement. However, past research showed that leadership soft skills are as critical as leadership hard skills, especially in managing employees for organizational excellence (Siti Asiah, 2011). Therefore a headmaster should adopt all the eight components of leadership soft skills namely collaboration/teamwork, communication skills, initiatives, leadership ability, personal development/coaching, personal effectiveness/mastery, planning and organizing and presentation skills to assist in school improvement progress. In addition, this study also contributes to the literature
of leadership in the Malaysian education context. In conclusion, leadership soft skills is one of the leadership styles that is able to empower teachers and develop human capital that required in the new trend of educational leadership today. Thus headmasters have to be smart to evaluate teachers' strength in order to achieve success in the organizations they led. In addition, school leaders need to be a good communicator, intelligent and skilful in managing collaboration and planning to move the schools to achieve organizational vision and mission that has been attempted. Therefore, all the school leaders are proposed to practise leadership soft skills in their school management in order to enhance school improvement. The results of this study have several implications for academics and researchers. This is especially true as they need to better understand the roles that leadership soft skills may play in increasing school improvement.

Acknowledgements

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References