A Study on the Relationship between Transformational Leadership and Creativity and Innovation from an Organisational Perspective: A Conceptual Model

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Abstract

This study aims to understand a conceptual model on the relationship between transformational leadership and creativity and innovation among Malaysian telecommunication mobile operators. The problem addressed in this study is the rapid technological changes that need telecommunication service providers, similar to other industries such as education, to be innovative from an organizational standpoint to adapt and achieve competitive advantage. A transformational leadership style is seen as the catalyst for creativity and innovation, which are influenced by strategy, structure, behaviour, and support mechanisms within an organisation. Although leadership has been routinely covered in reviews of creativity and innovation, it is usually covered briefly and noted as an area for future research, especially in technology-dependent industries such as telecommunication and education. These two variables are seen as essential to any organisation that wishes to sustain its competitive advantage in today's world of accelerated globalisation. The main objectives of the model are to determine the relationship of transformational leadership (covering intellectual stimulation, individual consideration, idealised influence, and inspirational motivation) with creativity and innovation (organisational factors). This paper attempts to offer significant theoretical and practical contributions and can be adapted in the education industry which is going through a massive digital paradigm shift with online learning.

Keywords: *Transformational Leadership, Creativity, Innovation, Competitive Advantage*

Introduction

Transformational leadership (inspirational motivation, idealised influence, individual consideration, and intellectual stimulation) is defined as a style of leadership that emphasises collective interest between the employees of an organisation working to achieve the same objective. It is in contrast with transactional leadership which focuses on individual interest and commitment towards the goal (Herrmann & Felfe, 2014; Boies et al., 2015). According to Bass (1999), most organisations exhibit both transactional and transformational leadership to different degrees. Although leadership has been routinely covered in past reviews of creativity and innovation, it is usually covered briefly, in a predominantly descriptive manner, or noted as an area for future research (De Clercq et al., 2013). Transformational leadership has been described based on idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individual consideration (Bass, 1985; Nemanich & Keller, 2007; Bass & Riggio, 2006; Mittal & Dhar, 2015). The variables of transformational leadership have been found to have significant associations to follower creativity (Huang et al., 2016).

Creativity and innovation (organisational factors such as support mechanism, structure, strategy, and behaviour) have become essential to organisations that wish to sustain their competitive advantage in today's world which has a high growth of new knowledge, ideas, and accelerated rate of globalisation, and research in the field has revealed interesting findings (Anderson et al., 2014). It is safe to say that creating a high- performing organisation is dependent upon the degree of creativity and innovation present, which will determine the success and survival of the organisation in the long run. Even though some organisations may have already attempted to encourage creativity and innovation by promoting human capital development, the extent may have been limited due to other influencing factors (Martins & Terblanche, 2003). Creativity and innovation are often seen to have a complex relationship and warrant detailed analysis to prove their outcome (Mumford & McIntosh, 2017).

Competition and rivalry among telecommunication mobile service providers is much more intense now compared to 20 years before. The specific phenomenon that this study attempted to address is the trend of decline in organisational performance from various perspectives as experienced by Malaysian mobile service providers with high competition, which is accelerated by rapid technological changes and constant change in the CEO in charge, which influence an organisation's adaptation to transformation. Increasing competition in the telecommunication market and gap in achieving competitive advantage need to be addressed, especially in Malaysia. The performance of incumbent telecommunication operators can be further analysed by looking at individual statistics such market share, revenue stream, subscriber base, service performance, customer satisfaction, and others which will be addressed in the following sections. The highly competitive global market of today calls for a more dynamic approach towards leadership (Levy et al., 2010).

Telecom service providers have exhibited the highest CEO turnover rate of any industry over the past 5 years, with an average of one in four telcos appointing a new CEO every year (PWC-Communications Review, 2017). In their drive to transform for today's increasingly digital-driven and customer-focused environment, a number of telecoms operators – especially those in mature markets – are expanding dramatically into new areas outside their traditional network business. Such moves help to reduce reliance on returns generated from investments in networks, while also expanding the range of skills they will need in future, which demands rebalancing towards more creative talent. In today's fast-changing marketplace, telecom operators across the world are more likely than companies in most other industries to recruit a CEO with transformational leadership skills to help in the transformational change of an organisation.

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the significance of the CEO's transformational leadership in influencing the creativity and innovation of the employees in the organisation. A framework from a study by Garcia-Morales et al. (2012) was adapted to answer questions regarding the relationship between these variables and is useful to minimise gaps in companies that hamper the extent of these determinants. The nature of the organisation as a whole determines the effects of having creativity and innovation to facilitate its performance (Cantner et al., 2011). In summary, the objective of this paper is to establish an understanding of the relationship between transformational leadership (idealised influence, intellectual stimulation, individual consideration, and inspirational motivation) with creativity and innovation (organisational factors based on strategy structure, support mechanisms, and behaviour). It will then be adapted to current mobile network operators in Malaysia, which comprise both local and partial or fully foreign owned companies by having an empirical test of the framework. There is a lack of studies which investigate the simultaneous effects of transformational leadership on creativity and innovation. The magnitude of the relationship is hugely variable and some studies are only experimental in nature (Boies et al., 2015), and there is a lack of survey-based field studies. The fast-changing dynamics of the telecommunication industry, with its technological revolutions, require a transformational CEO to drive creativity and innovation so as to continuously improve organisational performance and drive towards competitive advantage. This is the gap that the study intended to address. Furthermore, a similar conceptual model can be adapted to other transformative scenarios such as online distance learning in the education sector.

Literature Review

Malaysian Telecommunication Services

The telecommunication industry remains the largest industry today, considering its significant role in facilitating everyone's life (Hsu, 2017). This industry is continuously innovative in every aspect of how consumers interact with one another. Mobile technology can be traced to its 0G history, in which it is the first mobile communication service right after World War II. Evolution then happened with advancements in 1G, 2G, 2.5G, 3G, and 4G. Telecommunication operators had to leave behind old traditional business models and alter their strategies from voice-based subscription to innovative bundle plans that included internet data, voice, messages, etc. (Hajar et al., 2020) with the emergence of 5G technology.

Malaysia has a competitive telecom sector which has thrived on the progressive opening up and reform of the local market. The changing commercial landscape has seen significant restructuring of all the main players over time. Supported by the efforts of the government, there has been a general rationalisation of what was seen as an "overcrowded" mobile operator market. During the first 10 years (from 1984 to 1995), the industry was monopolised by a single mobile service organisation: Celcom. Subsequently, through the government's liberalisation policy, the industry was opened up to other players, resulting in seven telecommunications players. Four big names are traditionally associated with Malaysian telco companies: Digi, Maxis, Celcom, and U Mobile. The big three incumbent major telecommunication market shareholders – Digi, Maxis, Celcom – have been dominating the industry since privatisation by the government and are listed on Bursa Malaysia. Meanwhile, U Mobile being the smallest among the four, has been very aggressive in making a mark in the very competitive market with more innovative approaches in its promotion, pricing, and rapid network roll-out, capitalising on the emergence of LTE technology (Yapp, 2017).

The increasing competition in the telecommunication market and the gap in achieving competitive advantage need to be addressed, especially in Malaysia. The performance of the incumbent telecommunication operators can be analysed by looking at individual statistics such as market share, revenue stream, subscriber base, service performance, customer satisfaction, and others. The highly competitive global market of today calls for a more dynamic approach towards leadership (Levy et al., 2010). The transformational style of leadership plays an important role in building competitive advantage and maintaining market leadership abreast with current trends (Lee, 2008).

A study conducted in Poland by Kasia and John (2007) revealed that current rapid globalisation growth required the country to embrace creativity and innovation to reduce gaps in economic development challenges. A nation's economic growth is accelerated by corresponding telecommunication activities (Gary & Scott, 2000). Nevertheless, telecommunication organisations faced a difficult market situation where competition is fierce, accelerated by fast development of information technology in the form of the internet (Chong et al., 2009). Globalisation and the competitive trend force companies to adapt to a more efficient and effective strategy in the form of transformational leadership (Davenport & Prusak, 1998). This implies that the role of the telecommunication industry in facilitating the transformation of Malaysia towards becoming a knowledge-based economy (Chong et al., 2009) is dependent upon the state of the telecommunication industry driven by the CEOs.

Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership has been defined in terms of idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individual consideration (Bass, 1985; Bass & Riggio, 2006; Nemanich & Keller, 2007; Vasilaki et al., 2016) and the same has been adapted into this study. Transformational leaders often work out new initiatives for improvement and progress by generating novel ideas and looking at things from new perspectives (Jandaghi et al., 2009). The initial idea of a transformational leadership model was developed by James McGregor Burns, who applied it in a political context. It was subsequently applied into the organisational context by Bass (Efendi, 2015). They also emphasised change initiatives by motivating downline managers, employees, and members of the organisation by creating a strong sense of purpose and facilitating the readiness and capabilities of their followers. Transformational leadership plays a critical role in bringing about the changes necessary for effective management in an organisation (Buil et al., 2018). As suggested by Kim (2013), "Transformational leaders have the ability to transform organisations through their vision for the future, and by clarifying their vision, they can empower the employees to take responsibility for achieving that vision." Leadership theory differentiates between transactional and transformational leaders. Transactional leadership focuses on role and task requirements and utilises rewards contingent on performance. In contrast, transformational leadership focuses on developing mutual trust, fostering the leadership abilities of others, and setting goals that go beyond the short-term needs of the work group. Bass (1985) identified four independent components of transformational leadership: 1) idealised influence, 2) inspirational motivation, 3) intellectual stimulation, and 4) individual consideration. Bass' theory (1985) has been used extensively in many other studies on transformational leadership in the past three decades, such as in Boerner et al. (2007), Ling et al. (2008), Wang and Howell (2010), and Yahaya and Ebrahim (2016). Thus, the elements of transformational leadership (idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individual consideration) will be examined in this study.

Idealised influence is based on attributes and behaviours that build confidence and trust and provide a charismatic role model that followers seek to emulate (Eisenbeiss et al., 2008). The leaders show great persistence and determination in pursuing their objectives. They show high standards of moral and ethical conduct and have a distinct ability to generate enthusiasm and draw people together around a vision through self-confidence and emotional appeal (Avolio & Bass, 2002; Fisher, 2009).

Inspirational motivation sees transformational leaders expressing an appealing conception of the future or a vision, offering followers the opportunity to see meaning in their work, challenging them with high standards and moving team members towards action by building their confidence levels and generating belief in a cause (Eisenbeiss et al., 2008). According to Den Hartog and Koopman (2001), inspiration can be associated with the ability of a leader to act as a model to his or her followers. Thus, inspirational motivation portrays the approaches taken by leaders to influence their subordinates to meet both personal and organisational goals.

Intellectual stimulation involves changing followers' awareness of problems and their capacity to solve them (Bono & Judge, 2004). It includes stimulating their followers' efforts to be innovative by questioning assumptions, reframing problems, and approaching old situations or issues in new or novel ways (Avolio & Bass, 2002). There is no hesitation in discarding an old practice set by them if it is found to be ineffective. Den Hartog and Koopman (2001) claimed that intellectual stimulation not only influenced followers to question norms, even those of their leaders, which created an open environment for innovation.

Individual consideration involves treating people individually and differently on the basis of their talents and knowledge (Shin & Zhou, 2003) with the aim of allowing them to attain higher levels of achievement that otherwise might not be achieved (Stone et al., 2004). The leaders' requests will be more likely to be perceived to be in the followers' best interests, and so should be more likely to be fulfilled with enthusiasm (Fisher, 2009). Such leaders treat followers with respect and provide continuous follow-up and feedback (Hemsworth et al., 2013). Through individual consideration, the leaders get individual employees to make significant efforts to fulfil their needs (Ng, 2016).

Creativity and Innovation (Organisational Factor)

Creativity and innovation have become essential to any organisation that wishes to be competitive in terms of performance in today's world, which has a higher growth of new knowledge, ideas, and accelerated rate of globalisation (Chan & Mauborgne, 1999). In other words, creating a knowledge-based organisation that is dependent upon creative and innovative characteristics will determine the success and survival of an organisation in the long run. Even though some organisations may have already attempted to encourage creativity and innovation by promoting human capital development, the extent may have been limited due to other influencing factors (Martins & Terblanche, 2003). Consequently, it raises awareness of the need to outline the determinants that support or hinder an organisations' attempt to be creative and innovative, which will then make it possible to develop appropriate business and operation strategies. Nevertheless, given the importance of creativity and innovation in organisations, there has been relatively little empirical work done in the area of organisational factors and creativity and innovation (Oldham & Cummings, 1996). Leaders may stimulate creative and innovative performance by providing followers with high levels of autonomy and discretion (Pan et al., 2012), allocating needed resources (Gu et al., 2015), and building followers' confidence (Liao et al., 2010).

A strategy that promotes creativity and innovation reflects also the idea of developing new products and services as part of its scheme (Robbins & Judge, 2017). Having a vision and mission that focus on the future and are collectively cultivated by everyone in the organisation can be a strategy towards promoting creativity and innovation (Covey, 1993). According to McGill et al. (1992), such a strategy will place more stress on facilitating consumer market and customer-oriented activities where quality of service plays a more significant role than productivity. In a service organisation, the capacity to comprehend and act on changes by the management represents the organisation's strategy to move forward (Martins, 2000). This argument is supported by Shin and McClomb (1998), who mentioned that those who possess the ability to visualise the future in a clear direction encourage efforts to innovate within the organisation. A clear vision and mission, while important, require the adaptability of employees to understand and act based on the guidelines given (Lock & Kirkpatrick, 1995). Employees who fully understand and are willing to follow the direction of the management will determine the extent to which creative and innovative actions are promoted.

The structure of organisation that promotes creativity and innovation can be examined by looking at the degree of freedom in the organisation to make decisions by supporting autonomy and empowering individuals (Martins & Terblanche, 2003). Supporting this notion, Judge et al. (1997) stated that it is the employee's choice to act creatively to achieve goals within the general rules set by the organisation. Additionally, scholars emphasised the importance of leadership and having support from the management to allow actions of free will to encourage the flow of creativity in problem solving. Moreover, the relationship between organisational variables such as leadership and performance can be mediated by innovation. Organisational structure provides the internal configuration, including communication and resource flows that are crucial for innovation to occur (Russel, 1990).

Creativity and innovation or behavioural factors depict that employees should be allowed to feel that risk taking and experimenting are part of normal working behaviour and are actively supported by the organisation's leadership (Arad et al., 1997; Khalil, 1996; Robbins & Judge, 2017). However, the leaders must evaluate each risk-taking activity and drive to improve on mistakes to increase the success rate. In return, the organisation will develop a culture where employees are motivated to take moderated risks to achieve success rather than seek success which may be of less motivating factors (Aber, 1996).

The supporting mechanism of creativity and innovation can be related to the organisation's direction in implementing policies that develop human capital such as technology, training programmes and other resources that reflect the level of support towards creativity and innovation (Kasia & John, 2007). Organisations should evaluate carefully their investment in employees to ensure that it does not become a cost burden to the company (Snell & Bohlander, 2007) and threaten its competitiveness. When creative behaviour is duly rewarded, it will create an organisational factor that fosters the same behaviour among the employees (Arad et al., 1997). The direction of the organisation can be portrayed by the attitude of the staff within the firm (Martins & Terblanche, 2003). Similarly, having a workforce with significantly varied backgrounds can help to build an organisation which is creative and innovative through its individual employees' contributions, which are supported by a transformational leadership style. The notion of supporting mechanism urges employees to be creative and innovative, indicates active employee involvement, and reflects organisational performance (Alrowwad et al., 2017).

Conceptual Model

Transformational leadership can be described through four distinctive factors: inspirational motivation, idealised influence, intellectual stimulation, and individual consideration (Bass & Steidlmeir, 2016). The theory of transformational leadership is often linked to creativity of employees (Shin & Zhou, 2003). The proactive behaviours of transformational leadership iterate the importance of changing the status quo within an organisation and promoting innovation. Hence, the following hypothesis is posited:

H1. There is a positive relationship between transformational leadership and creativity and innovation.

Transformational leadership focuses on developing a high level of commitment between leaders and subordinates by emphasising common goals and the achievement of higher psychological needs (Bass, 1985; Kirby et al., 1992; Leithwood, 1992). Additionally, Shamir et al. (1993) stated that transformational leadership can motivate followers by addressing the need to cultivate common values, increasing self-efficacy, and understanding social identification within the organisation. This allows employees to exhibit creativity in problem solving and nurtures innovation at the workplace (Sosik et al., 1998; Schepers et al., 2005). The motivation of an employee increases with the level of empowerment received (Lashley, 2001). A leader's inspirational motivation plays a pivotal role in promoting creativity and innovation (Nardelli, 2017). An empowered employee feels personally effective in the outcomes related to the work carried out. This creates a more conducive and motivating working environment that facilitates creative thinking and innovative action (Arad et al., 1997). Therefore, the following hypothesis is posited:

H2. There is a positive relationship between inspirational motivation and creativity and innovation.

Leaders are able to spur followers towards creativity through their behaviour as part of organisational culture (Phipps et al., 2012). Transformational leadership in the context of idealised influence or exhibiting charismatic leadership helps to promote a higher level of creativity among subordinates (Arendt, 2009) which encourages them to accomplish extraordinary things, and develop preferences for challenging and demanding tasks, which result in more creative actions. Transformational leaders help followers feel trusted, remain loyal, and rely strongly on the leadership to guide them in exploring new challenges (Shin & Zhou, 2003). Idealised influence lets leaders inspire employees and gain their respect and loyalty (Shafi et al., 2019) to become creative and innovative. The above literature led to the creation of the following hypothesis:

H3. There is a positive relationship between idealised influence and creativity and innovation.

According to Oldham and Cummings (1996), being supportive of employees' talents and strengths encourages them to become more involved in creative activities. They also suggested that supporting employees' talents will have a positive effect on innovativeness. According to Sosik et al. (1998), in comparison with other types of leaders, transformational leaders tend to promote individual followers who are able to think more divergently and adopt generative and exploratory thinking processes that produce creative outcomes at the workplace. Through individual consideration, the leaders require individual employees to make significant efforts to accomplish what they want (Ng, 2016). Therefore, individual consideration complements the efforts of the transformational leader, who is considerate about providing the necessary support for his or her followers and helps to boost the creativity of employees in return. So, the next hypothesis is:

H4. There is a positive relationship between individual consideration and creativity and innovation.
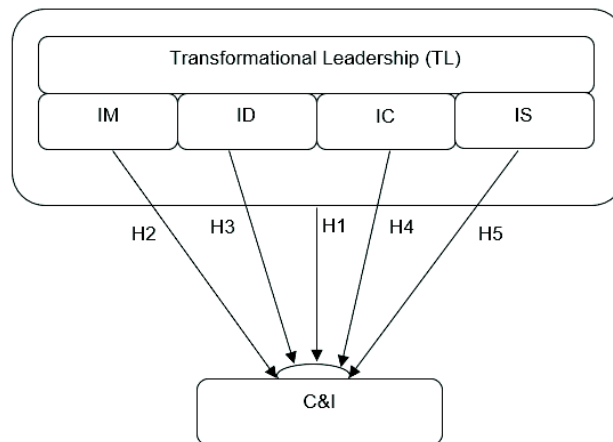
Intellectual stimulation is the act of simulating the capabilities of employees to think out of the box while solving issues and refreshing their thoughts (Gilmore et al., 2013). As mentioned by Kelly (2003), a leadership style that promotes intellectual stimulation is able to influence employees to see work-related problems from various angles and as such, develop the ability to solve the problems. Employees can be stimulated by questioning norms, re-addressing approaches towards problems, and being innovative to solve them (Avolio & Bass, 2002). A leader's intellectual stimulation plays a pivotal role in promoting creativity and innovation (Nardelli, 2017). Therefore, it appears that intellectual stimulation creates a positive effect on organisational creativity and innovation. Thus, the following hypothesis is postulated:

H5. There is a positive relationship between intellectual stimulation and creativity and innovation.

Based on the theory of resources and prior discussion related to all the variables, the conceptual model is developed as follows:

Figure 1

Conceptual Model

Note. TL = transformational leadership (antecedent); IM = inspirational motivation; ID = idealised influence; IC = individual consideration; IS = intellectual stimulation; C&I = creativity and innovation (Outcome)

Conclusion

The transformational leadership of the CEO dictates the culture of creativity and innovation in an organisation that further explains its performance and growth. Increasing competition in the telecommunication industry can be addressed by employing transformative CEOs to drive initiatives to close the gap and remain competitive in the market. A conceptual model of the effect of transformational leadership on creativity and innovation can be used in future research to test and explain the relationship. The managerial implications of this model include understanding of the impact of transformational leadership on an organisation's creativity and innovative practices. Future research can

explore the relationship of the variables in other industries beyond telecommunication such as in the education sector where online distance learning is the new norm to increase the adoption of the theory. In addition, academics can use the additional knowledge in the theory behind transformational leadership, creativity and innovation, and organisational performance.

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