

“Building Core Competencies for Sustainability through Leadership and Teamwork – The Experience of a Leading ODL Institution’s Star Faculty”

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Abstract

Malaysia’s quest for achieving the status of a developed nation and increasing competition in the workforce has spurred working adults to enroll in higher learning institutions. Due to work and time constraints, most of these learners have chosen to opt for open and distance learning where they can engage in their studies while continuing to work at the same time. Open University Malaysia, as the leading ODL institution in the country, strives to fulfill its learners’ expectations while at the same time trying to forge ahead with limitations in terms of workforce, technological changes and increased competition faced by most ODL institutions. Taking these limitations in mind and realising that its future sustainability lies in its core competencies, the university’s Faculty of Business and Management has undertaken a massive move to build these competencies. Through sheer hard work and determination, the faculty has risen to be a “star” faculty in the university – showing improvements in terms of quality assessment and learning materials matched with an increase in student numbers and student satisfaction. This study shares their experiences and their secrets to success. Theirs is a journey of transformational leadership and teamwork, where two leaders lead from the front and behind - propelling a strong team towards a journey that will lead to the future.

Keywords:

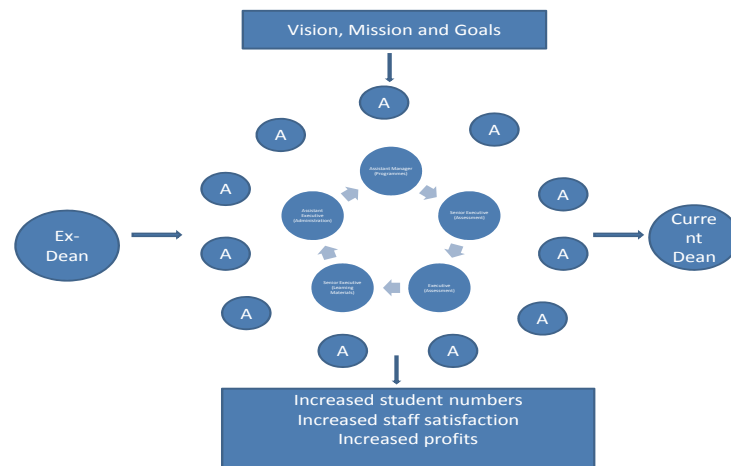
Core Competencies, Sustainability, Leadership, Teamwork, Open Distance Learning

Introduction

A university needs significant expertise to operate effectively and efficiently (Martens and Salewski, 2009) and the key to transforming strategy into reality lies in the right projects, the right sponsors and the right people (Martens and Salewski, 2009). Sala (2003) found that although many researchers have sought to identify the managerial characteristics and leadership styles that contribute to effective academic administration, no studies were found that show the impact of organizational climate that is created by an academic leader. Moreover, although many studies have focused on what universities and colleges should change, few have actually addressed how to change (Mintzberg, 2004 and Scott, Coates and Anderson, 2008). Rarer still are studies on how leaders manage change (Scott *et. al.*, 2008). This study fills the gap in research by showing how two academic leaders have paved the way to a positive organizational climate where strong leadership and teamwork have resulted in change and contributed to a faculty’s success.

Methodology and Strategic Framework

A case study approach was adopted for this research as the research was exploratory in nature with the objective of finding out if there is a link between leadership, teamwork and performance.



The Faculty of Business and Administration is headed by the Dean who is the leader, assisted by two deputy deans – one for assessment and one for learning materials. At the heart of the faculty is the support staff as denoted by the five inner circles. Two of them are in charge of assessment, one for learning materials while two others are in charge of the faculty’s administration. The outer circle represents all the academicians, including the two deputy deans. The academicians also act as programme coordinators for the faculty’s various programmes. On the left of the diagram is the ex-Dean who now heads the university’s institute of teaching and learning.

The Faculty’s Experience

Leaders are the power behind an organisation, producing change and movement (Vetrivel, 2010). Leaders create and manage an organisation’s culture (Schein, 1985) and influence the behaviour of employees (Kennedy, Goolsby and Arnould, 2003). They are responsible for the success of their subordinates, customers and organizational stakeholders (Ehrhart, 2004). Academic leaders in particular have responsibility for mission, direction, inspiration, bulding teamwork and setting an example (Law and Glover, 2000).

Leaders are important as, if they treat their employees well, the employees will then reciprocate by treating customers well (Chebat and Kollias (2000). In fact employees’ extra-role behaviour increases when they perceive that their supervisors or leaders are supportive (Shanock and Eisenberger, 2006; Aselage and Eisenberger, 2003). Effective leaders get things done and create a positive environment in which people are happy, motivated, committed and have confidence in their capabilities (Jaramillo *et. al.*, 2009). Effective leaders listen, link and lead – and actively teach their staff how to make the desired changes work (Fullan and Scott, 2009). Extraversion has been found to be the best personality predictor of transformational leadership (Bono and Judge, 2004; Ployhard, Lim and Chan, 2001). Extravert leaders are dominant, assertive, outgoing and talkative (Ashton, Lee and Paunonen) and they express charisma, provide intellectual stimulation, and offer individualised consideration to employees (Bono and Judge, 2004). Transformational leaders motivate employees to go beyond their self-interests and adopt the

organisation's visions and mission as their own (Ingram *et. al.*, 2005). All this holds true for OUM's Faculty of Business and Management Dean, who is indeed a transformational leader.

Where educational institutions are concerned, leaders encounter significant external and internal challenges which have an impact on their time, expertise, energies and emotional wellbeing (Vetrivel, 2010). Leaders have a critical role to play in making sure that any required changes are effectively and sustainably put into practice, especially in the current turbulent education environment (Scott *et. al.*, 2010). Leaders have to build their employees' talent as this will advance a university's strategic direction and increase its competitive position (Martens and Salewski, 2009). Followers can measure how serious their leaders are about key values by observing how much time is spent on them (Kouzes and Posner, 2003) and whether the leader addresses the questions of what needs to be done and what is right for the organisation (Drucker, 2004). The Dean in FBM pushes for proactive behaviour by empowering the team members with specific tasks.

The faculty is rather unique in that it still has the guidance and leadership of its ex-Dean although from afar. As the ex-Dean pursues the university's pursuit of excellence in teaching and learning, he makes sure the faculty is always leading in the exercise. He is what is described by Hill (2008) as leading from behind or akin to a shepherd. He stays behind the flock whereupon people follow without realizing that they are being directed from behind. According to Hill, leading from behind requires crucial responsibilities and judgment calls – deciding who is in or out, articulating values for the group, developing talents of team members so that they can flourish in their roles, setting boundaries and managing the tensions in the group.

This in effect also holds true for the current Dean where the two deputy deans are given full empowerment to manage their portfolios. Programme coordinators are given empowerment for their respective programmes, overseeing the programme structure, student numbers and retention rates, marketing activities and academic counseling. However, teamwork still prevails, as for each programme or activity, the deputy deans and coordinators form teams to ensure activity or projects are completed as efficiently and effectively as possible. Although the Dean is always involved, the role of decision maker for the individual projects is held by the respective team leader. Thus, he develops competence and confidence and foster accountability in the work that is done, supporting Kouzes and Posner's (2002) claim that these are essential factors for strengthening others to act. According to them, workers who feel a sense of empowerment, ownership responsibility and involvement are more satisfied and productive, leading to positive business outcomes (*ibid.*). This is certainly true for the faculty as faculty members are very happy and feel a high sense of belongingness to the team. They even have the motto of "Once an FBM member, always an FBM". In a recent scenario where the Dean was going to retire, the whole faculty spoke up and requested for his extension – showing respect and appreciation for all that he has done for them.

However, there are times when both the current Dean and the former Dean use a combination of the authoritative and coaching style of leadership. For example, in a recent bid to increase the level of the faculty's assessment, the former Dean instructed that the format of the examination questions be changed to reflect the different levels of Bloom's Taxonomy. To ensure that this was done, the current Dean gave strict orders for all academicians to adhere to this format and personally monitored the submission and endorsement of all examination questions. He himself and the Deputy Dean for Assessment trained and coached the academicians in the formulation of the questions. As a result of this, the faculty attained a high level of standards in terms of its assessment which in turn drove learning not only amongst the learners but amongst academicians as well. Student performance increased and the output by faculty members also increased. The faculty also managed to increase the numbers of student intakes, making them the best faculty in the university where open market learners are concerned. This supports Sala's (2003) findings that the authoritative and coaching styles of leadership showed a direct relationship to both climate and performance outcomes in an academic setting, where the authoritative style was

positively correlated with the rate of student retention, support for students and college management ratings.

The training of the academicians further supports Kouzes and Posner's (2002) view that training will result in greater understanding of and alignment with organizational visions and values. The increased level of quality is directly aligned to the university's vision of being the leading provider of flexible learning. The Deans' efforts (both the current and ex-Dean) to create a learning environment fostered the team's trust and increased their credibility in their eyes. By being involved, first-hand in training them and taking the effort to correct their mistakes, the Deans forced the team to grow and prosper – leading them by the hand and by example.

The study also supports Grant, Gino and Hofmann's (2011) findings that complementarity between leadership style and employee proactivity contributes to group performance. Their findings show that the highest level of group performance was achieved either when a lack of proactivity from employees was paired with a more extraverted leadership style or when employee proactivity was paired with a less extraverted leadership style. In the initial stages when the team in the faculty was not proactive, the ex-Dean's more extraverted leadership style resulted in high team performance. At the later stage, when the team was proactive, the current Dean's less extraverted style resulted in high team performance. By being receptive to employees' ideas and their efforts to improve work, the latter was able to develop more efficient and effective practices that enhanced the team's effectiveness. At this stage where the team is already proactive, a more extraverted leader would need to adapt a more reserved, quiet style (Grant, Gino and Hofmann, 2011).

The experience of the faculty also supports Yelder and Codling's (2004) view that teamwork, the aligning of expertise to leadership roles and the need for excellence is essential in management and leadership in the university. The self-contained intellectual of yester years has now to become a faculty academic who is able to balance personal research and teaching objectives with those of the university, while at the same time conforming to externally driven expectations about his or her quality performance (*ibid.*). It also supports Coates *et.al.*'s (2010) findings that there is an increased need for management and leadership styles to be aligned with the specific nature of a particular university. In the faculty's case, strong teamwork, finding ways to improve, the ability to perform under pressure and time constraints all reflect the university's values of teamwork, professionalism, innovation, integrity and sharing.

Future Directions

The success of OUM's Faculty of Business and Management has been spurred mainly by the two leaders, leading both from the front and from behind.

As Yelder and Codling (2004) succinctly put it:

It is essential to acknowledge the inspirational, galvanizing effect that a leader should have. As much as anything, leadership is about creating a vision of what might be, and fostering a culture that supports and can achieve that vision. A leader doesn't have to do it all, but must articulate an inspiring vision that compels others to "buy in".

The team in FBM had full trust in their leaders as the leaders' actions reinforced what they said and believed. Without this trust and credibility, the team would not have been able to move forward to a level that surpassed even the leaders' expectations.

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