

Early Insights into Leadership Development Among University Academic Staff

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Abstract: *Organizations today operate in an environment shaped by constant change-rising market competition, shifting government policies, and rapidly evolving information technologies. These pressured demand leaders who are equipped with strong competencies to guide their organizations effectively through ongoing transformations. As global technological advancement accelerates, leadership capabilities become even more vital to ensure that organizational goals remain aligned with current trends and future expectations. Developing leadership competencies is therefore a continuous and strategic effort. It only supports technological progress but also strengthens employees' overall capacity by enhancing their skills, knowledge, and abilities. Leaders who possess these competencies are better able to inspire their teams, communicate organizational goals clearly, and translate strategic plans into concrete actions. Their ability to delegate tasks appropriately, motivate employees toward high performance, and manage conflict constructively contributes to a healthier and more productive workplace. Such leaders also tend to adapt quickly and function effectively within diverse, multicultural environments. In the context of higher education, these qualities are particularly important. Academic staff increasingly shoulder leadership responsibilities that influence teaching, research and institutional development. This study aims to examine the essential features of leadership development programs that best prepare academic staff to assume future leadership roles. By identifying the components of effective programs, this paper provides insight into how academic institutions can strengthen leadership capacity to meet changing organizational and global demands.*

Keywords: Leadership Competencies; Leadership Development; Leadership Training Programs; Academic Leadership; Professional Development; Academic Staff

1. Introduction

Conflicts in organizations often emerge from pressures created by the political, economic, social, and technological environment. These external forces compel organizations to shift from traditional management practices to more modern, technology-driven systems that supports better service delivery and expand public knowledge (Khair,2009). They must guide employees through the transition, shape positive attitudes toward change, and help individuals embrace new practices with openness and readiness.

Influencing others is therefore a core competency for effective leaders, especially when dealing with employees. Bennis and Thomas (2002) describe influencing ability as the social skill to create shared meaning and communicate with clarity and authenticity. Increasing competition at both national and global levels further intensifies the need for experience and well-developed skills are better equipped to manage challenges and resolve conflicts that arise within the organization.

Leaders who are unable to provide direction also contribute to organizational inefficiency. Effective leadership requires the ability to plan, organize, prioritize, and coordinate departmental activities so that organizational objectives are achieved. Interpersonal competence is essential, as leaders must manage different personalities, navigate workplace pressures, and prevent conflicts. Strong teams exist when leaders emphasize communication, clarity of goals, continuous improvement, and the meaningful use of available resources (Evenden & Anderson, 1992).

A lack of leadership training further compounds these issues. Leadership development programs provide leaders with the ability to analyse challenges from new perspectives, make wiser decisions, build confidence, and strengthen their influence. Such programs teach leaders how to motivate others, differentiate effective sources of power, and apply influence ethically and strategically.

This study seeks to examine current leadership competencies to improve how leaders deliver information to their employees. Information literacy in the workplace is increasingly important, as knowledge workers contribute significantly to organizational strategy through critical thinking and communication (Klusek & Bornstein, 2006). As work processes shift from routine tasks to more dynamic responsibilities, the need for advanced communication grows. Work complexity affects decision-making, and the quality of information shaped by both the delegator and the delegate directly influences workplace outcomes (Anthony & Vidal, 2010).

2. Literature Review

Leadership Development

Day (2000) explains that leadership development traditionally focuses on enhancing individual leaders rather than improving the social systems and processes around them. He further differentiates between leaders' development, which strengthens individuals, and leadership developments, which nurtures collective processes involving both leaders and followers such as collaboration in self-managed teams.

Drath et al. (2008) propose a broader view of leadership that shifts from a leader-centric perspective to the development of collective capability. Instead of seeing leadership merely as the act of influencing followers toward a shared goal, they describe it as the shared production of direction, alignment and commitment among groups. This conceptual expansion acknowledges that leadership can emerge from interactions within the collective, not only from appointed individuals.

Leadership development typically emphasizes building knowledge, skills, and abilities essential for formal leadership roles. These capabilities emerge when individuals learn to think differently, act strategically, and strengthen their human capital (Coleman, 1988). Key developmental processes include forming an accurate self-concept (Gardner, 1993), nurturing positive identity and attitudes (Hall & Seibert, 1992), and applying these internal models to improve

organizational performance. Leadership development, on the other hand, concentrates on interpersonal effectiveness trust building, relationship management, and fostering commitment (Gardner, 1993).

Leadership development has become increasingly vital in today's complex business environment. Although many organizations acknowledge its importance, only a minority actively implement formal development initiatives. Giver et al.(2000) highlight that although most organizations recognize the need for leadership development, fewer than half have established structured programs. This lack of preparation places organizations at a disadvantage in navigating rapid changes. In contrast, institutions that invest strategically in leadership initiatives supported by strong culture, structure, and clear plans tend to be more resilient and future ready (Fulmer, 1997; Miller et al.,2001).

In higher education, leadership development is even more crucial due to shifting global expectations, increasing institutional complexity, and evolving academic roles. Despite its importance, leadership development within universities remains underexplored. Higher education leaders now operate in more uncertain environments, requiring adaptable, diverse approaches to leadership. However, literature on leadership development activities, effectiveness, and outcomes in universities remains limited. A review of international studies reveals gaps in understanding how leadership development programs are designed and how they influence academic leadership capacity.

Leadership Competencies

Leadership is a central factor influencing organizational success (Mohd Yatim, 2006; Bush, 2008). Leaders serve not only as supervisors but also as mentors and motivators who work with staff to achieve institutional goals. For leaders to be effective, they need relevant skills, appropriate personality traits, and strong domain knowledge (Male, 2006). Eddy (2013) emphasizes that only competent leaders can consistently deliver strong results.

Organizations with effective leaders typically possess well-defined goals, whereas those with weak leadership often struggle with unclear direction (Robinson, 2006; Robinson et al.,2008). Clear goals help inspire staff and align their efforts toward organizational aspirations (Bush,2008). McNair, Duree, and Ebbers (2011) similarly found that leaders in educational settings must possess specific skills and competencies to manage modern institutional challenges. Leadership competencies can be strengthened through training, experience and ongoing knowledge development (Eddy, 2013). The challenge today, however, lies in identifying capable candidates as many leaders are appointed without meeting competency standards (Howson, 2005). Leadership selection should therefore be based on competency frameworks to ensure effective leadership (Hollenbeck et al.,2006; Rothwell,2010).

Spendlove's (2007) research in the United Kingdom shows that leadership competencies required in higher education institutions differ from those needed in school settings. Higher Educational Institutions (HEI) leaders require a broader set of competencies due to the unique nature of academic governance and institutional complexity. Yet, literature on leadership competencies within Malaysian higher education remains limited.

Competence refers to the essential attributes needed to perform work effectively (Chen & Naquin, 2006; Bass & Bass, 2008). It encompasses skills, knowledge, attitudes, motivations, and personal characteristics that enable individuals to produce high-quality outcomes aligned

with organizational strategy. Competent leadership is therefore central to institutional performance (Rothwell, 2010).

However, research shows that many universities lack structured systems to identify or prepare future leaders. Howson (2005) found that universities in England and Wales often appointed leaders without formal leadership preparation. Spendlove (2007) noted that nearly 70% of UK higher education institutions lacked systematic leadership development programs. Similarly, Norzaini et al. (2012) reported that newer institutions in Malaysia do not have dedicated leadership development structures for academic leaders. As a result, many leaders assume their positions without adequate preparation, leading to limited managerial capacity and reduced effectiveness (Eddy, 2013; Gentry et.al.,2013). Therefore, this research recommended as conceptual framework for leadership competencies development (Figure 1).

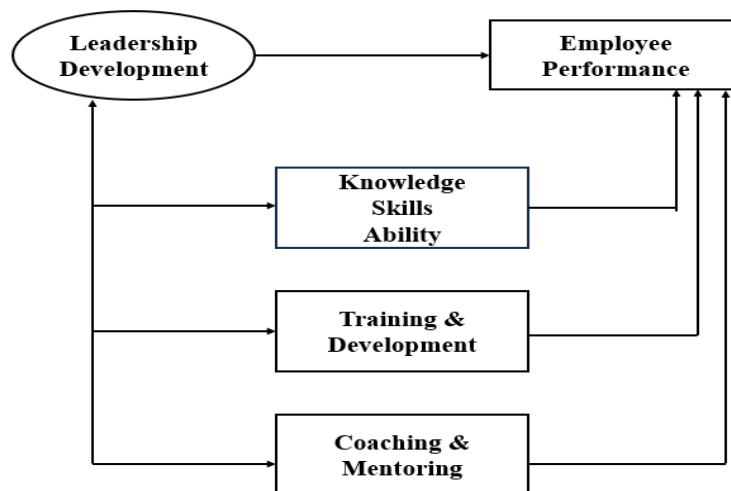


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework for Leadership Competencies Development
 Source Adapted: Day, 2000; Noe, 2017; Kram, 1985; Collins & Holton, 2004 & Aguinis,2019

3. Conclusion

Support from management plays a vital role in sustaining the professional growth of academic staff. Administrators act not only as program coordinators but also as facilitators who guide, motivate, and provide resources for continuous development. The effectiveness of any professional development initiative ultimately depends on the administrators' willingness to encourage, nurture and prioritize the advancement of academic staff competencies.

For development programs to produce meaningful outcomes, their goals and objectives must be aligned with the actual professional needs of academic staff. Ongoing assessment of these needs is essential, as it forms the foundation for designing appropriate activities, determining program priorities, and ensuring relevance.

Regardless of their position or level leadership, academic staff serve as ambassadors of their institutions. They are expected to uphold professional behavior, demonstrate dedication to their responsibilities, and build constructive relationships within the institution. In addition, they often act as key intermediaries with external stakeholders who contribute to institutional credibility and support. Therefore, preparing academic staff for professional excellence is crucial. They must be equipped with the awareness and skills necessary to foster positive interactions both internally and with partnering agencies to strengthen institutional legitimacy and trust.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this study.

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